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JUST AS ELDON HELD HER CLASPED TO HIS BREAST, GERTRUDE STEPPED OUT ON THE TERRACE BEHIND THEM.

A FATAL JEST.

[A NOVELETTE.]

CHAPTER I.

"The long green lawns are fresh with dew,
And trodden by the dancing feet
Of sunbeams, and the air is blue
At morn, and, oh! so cool and sweet.

When little shadows come and pass
Like spirits o'er the wind-blown grass!
In flush of rose on field of snow
The orchard heaves a floral sea!

The skies have gained a summer glow,
And smile as they look down on me;
The birds sing loud, from copse and spray,
A welcome to the merry May."

"Well, Elton, what's up with you! Why do you look so glum?"

"Do I look glum?"

"Worse than that, old fellow. Decidedly

unlucky. There's a wretched hang-dog kind of air about you, as though you were going to be executed."

"So I am."

"What, executed! What do you mean! What crime have you committed?"

"None. Only I might just as well have committed all sorts of crimes."

"Do explain!"

The speakers stood on the steps of a fashionable club in Piccadilly. They were both young, both good-looking, and from their general aspect, bearing, &c., seemed both to belong to the army. Here the resemblance ended, for one was very dark, with coal-black hair and moustache, brown eyes, an olive skin, and an immense frame; the other was only a little above middle height, slightly, yet gracefully made, with fair hair and grey eyes, that looked strange in contrast with his face, "deep bronzed by kiss of eastern sun."

"You are curious, Diamond," said the latter, with a mirthless laugh.

"I am. Do you wonder?"

"No. You always take a lively interest in my affairs."

"Of course I do. Ever since we wore jackets and topers, and thrashed Harrow so soundly that year you batted so splendidly."

"Yes."

"Now, what is it?"

"Come in, and I'll tell you," and together the two friends went into the club, and over brandy-and-aodas Elton Elton told his woes to Dudley Diamond, his sworn friend and companion.

"You know my uncle, Sir Geoffrey, is eccentric?"

"Yes, perfectly."

"And, well—as he has educated and brought me up and all that, I suppose I ought not to say it, but—rather stingy."

"Yes," laughed Diamond. "He certainly bears the reputation of being close."

"That is a polite way of putting it. You know all I have of my own is three hundred a-year my mother left me!"

"Yes."

"Not overmuch for a fellow in a crack regiment to have to spend besides his pay."

"No. I couldn't make it do," and again Desmond laughed his rich, mellow, jovial laugh.

"Why, I have as many thousands, and don't find it any too much."

"No, I guess not. Well, when we came from Cyprus I went ahead at Malta, and then when we came home I betted and lost, and lived hard and got into debt."

"Did the old gentleman pay?"

"Yes, he paid."

"How much?"

"Two thousand five hundred."

"Ah! A good sum for him to part with. It must have been a wrench."

"It was—like taking out all his grinders."

"I should think so. How did you manage to get him to part?"

"Worried him quietly, and told him it would never do to let his heir be damned for such a paltry sum."

"But you are not his heir, are you? By that, I mean, that, though the title goes to you, if he dies childless he need not leave much else."

"Nothing, unless he pleases. Even Eldon Court is his. My grandfather was such a spend-thrift that he made away with all his possessions."

"Defrauded his descendants?"

"I think so."

"Sir Geoffrey must have been particularly fortunate in India to have amassed so much wealth."

"Singularly fortunate. He bought back the family estates, and other lands as well, and has a round sum in consols and foreign stock."

"Nice for his heir."

"If you mean me by that, I don't think it is at all nice for me."

"Why not?"

"Because I've been brought up luxuriously and uselessly. I'm good for nothing but the army. And if he chooses to disinherit me I shall have to leave the profession I love, and live in genteel poverty on three hundred a year."

"But he won't disinherit you."

"He may."

"Why do you speak with such lugubrious certainty, as though your being cut out of his will was a foregone conclusion?"

"Because he has made a stipulation which I now find very hard to fulfil."

"When did he make it?"

"When he paid that cursed two thousand five hundred for me."

"And what is the stipulation?"

"That I should marry at any time he named, and, moreover, a lady chosen by him."

"Phew! Eldon, that's hard lines!"

"Yes; a heavy price to pay for my debts."

"Rather. That accounts, then, for your gloominess."

"Isn't it enough to make a fellow gloomy?"

"I should think so; more than enough. But you must be hopeful; he may leave you in the enjoyment of single blessedness for a long while yet."

"I wish to Heaven he would!" groaned Eldon, "but the bolt has fallen."

"By that you mean —?"

"That he has ordered me to marry within a year."

"Poor fellow! And has he found the damsel who is to hold the proud position of being the future Lady Eldon of Eldon Court?"

"He has found *two*!" exclaimed the other, with another dismal groan.

"Two! But—I say, old fellow, you can't marry both, you know, unless you mean to live at Utah, or join the Turkish army, and become a titled pacha. Plurality of spouses is not recognised in England."

"Of course not. Don't you understand, you blockhead"—with angry despair—"that I am to choose a wife from this pair of females?"

"Oh, I see!" returned Dudley, good-naturedly, as usual, and not in the least put out at being termed a "blockhead." "And who are these ladies?"

"Neighbours of my uncle."

"Have you ever seen them?"

"I believe I did years ago, when I wore petticoats and pinafores."

"Then, of course, you don't remember them?"

"Not in the least. They live at Mayne Place, about five miles from the Court. And when I have paid a short and flying visit to my uncle I have not seen them, as they spent a good deal of time in Italy and the south of France, one of them being delicate."

"Are they sisters?"

"No—cousins."

"Rich?"

"Yes and no."

"What do you mean?"

"One is rich, the other poor."

"Which is which?"

"Gertrude Mayne, the Squire's daughter, is heiress to six thousand a year; Marguerite Mervyn has fifty pounds per annum, which pays for her gloves and furbelows."

"Then she's a sort of poor relation?"

"In reality she is, only I am told Mr. Mayne makes little difference between her and his own daughter."

"Are they pretty?"

"Uncle Geoff says so."

"Dark or fair?"

"Both."

"There you go again. What do you mean? Have they fair skins and dark hair, or vice versa, or is it that one is as white as alily and the other blooming as a rose?"

"I mean that one has blue eyes; and let me see. What did uncle term her hair?" reflectively.

"Taw-colour!" suggested Desmond gravely.

"Rubbish."

"Carrotty, then?"

"No; I've hit it, corn-coloured."

"Jehoshaphat!" whistled Dudley, "that is an expression for a sober old bird like Sir Geoffrey!"

"Yes. Rather startling."

"And the other?"

"Black locks."

"No, you mean raven tresses."

"Chiparone!" laughed Elsom, some of the gloom clearing off his handsome face.

"Well, I was only doing Sir Geoffrey."

"Dark eyes, majestic figure."

"That sounds corpulent."

"Queenly, then. Will that do?"

"That's better," with an approving nod of his dark head.

"A sweet temper. Amiability itself."

"Which is the heiress? Black or white?"

"White."

"I thought so."

"Why?"

"Because you said *la brune* was amiable. Now, my experience is that heiresses are not amiable. They don't take the trouble to please."

"Perhaps they don't think there is any necessity to—that their money-bags will make up for a deficiency of sweetness of disposition."

"I don't see why they should. Everyone isn't hunting money."

"You, for instance."

"Agreed. I should never value anyone according to their wealth."

"You wouldn't think much of me, if you did, old man, would you?"

"Possibly not. Now, to return to our muttons. Miss Mervyn, knowing she is poor, does all she can to make herself agreeable and lovable, while Miss Mayne is doubtless arrogant and haughty."

"Not at all. If report speaks truly, she is more lovable than Miss Mervyn, only, as is natural in one in her position, is a little self-willed and wayward. Her father, of course, has spoiled and petted her, still she is described as being of a singularly bright, winning disposition."

"I am certain she won't turn out half as nice as the poor one," declared Desmond, obstinately.

"Rubbish! That's just your fad to think everyone with money is a brute; and let me tell you, my boy, it's my firm conviction that if you

get half a chance you'll fall in love with penniless Miss Mervyn."

"But you see I shan't even have half a chance."

"I'm not so sure of that."

"What are you driving at now?"

"Haven't you heard that the regiment is ordered to Olemow?"

"No."

"Well, it is, and that charming town is only four miles from Mayne Place."

"Oh!" exclaimed Desmond.

"And in any case, if ours had not been ordered there, I should of course have taken you down to introduce you to my future wife," here he made a wry face, "and her relatives."

"To the pair of females, in fact?" roguishly.

"Yes."

"When do you go?"

"To-morrow, worse luck."

"It certainly is very pleasant in town just now," and he glanced at the well-thronged, sunlit street, and the blue sky above.

"Pleasant! It's delightful, and to have to leave it and bury oneself in a country house is maddening."

"Perhaps you won't find it so bad when you get there."

"Bah! It can't be worse," returned Eldon, irritably.

"There's no shooting nor hunting now, and fishing I detest, while tennis is too feminine a game, too milkish and watery sport to interest me much; and to have to knock about balls face to face with a woman, or two women, who know you've been imported to propose to them, and who expect you to do it from minute to minute, is intolerable."

"Don't go, then. Tell Sir Geoffrey you'd rather be excused."

"You know I can't," answered Eldon, a sullen look disfiguring the beauty of his fair face. "I can't face poverty, after the life I've led."

"Then face a pretty wife, and make the best of it."

"It's very well for you to preach—you with a good income, and no one to please save yourself. If you stood in my shoes—"

"I couldn't, my dear fellow, if I tried ever so hard they'd never fit me," with a glance at his friend's small, well-shaped patent leather-clad foot.

"You'd think it confoundedly hard to have to marry a wife chosen for you by somebody else before you were thirty."

"No doubt I should," he assented, gravely.

"And then to insist on his project being carried out now, in the height of the season, is most unreasonable. I've heaps and heaps of engagements and invitations."

"That's just why he takes you away, takes you out of the reach of temptation. You might see some bright-eyed, fair girl, who would steal your young affections, and circumvent his plans."

"I shouldn't mind so much if it were autumn. I might get on then by days spent amongst the stubbles or at the covert sides."

"Doubtless. Only it isn't autumn, and you'll have to go all the same."

"It's abominable. I haven't heard Sigid Arnoldson yet; and they say she is simply charming as Zerlina, while Patti sings next Saturday in *Il Barbiere*, and I shall miss that as well."

"No matter, Elsom! When you are a Benedict your rich wife will let you live where you like, if you only manage her properly."

"I may not have a rich wife. My kind relative will probably insist on my choosing the poor one."

"Still, you'll get his money in the end."

"The game will be hardly worth the candle," he answered, moodily, a look of silliness settling in his eyes, and it was there the next day as the train whirled him rapidly towards Mayne, the nearest station to Eldon Court, and he occupied himself with the *Sporting Life*, and gave never a glance at the "floral sea" around, at the waving branches in their lively of tender green, the heaps of lilac bloom, the hedgerows, white with may, the meadows gemmed with

many a flower, the "wind blown grass" and sunlit rivers.

CHAPTER II.

"Brown eyes, blue eyes,
Eyes full of fire.
Eyes tender, melting with love's desire."

A MAIL phaeton, splendidly horsed, was waiting at the station for him, and as he got into it and took the ribbons from the smart groom, a sigh of pleasure escaped his lips. After all, there was nothing like money in the world—it could procure so many luxuries, so many delights. Poor devils without two sixpences to jingle on a tombstone, as they say in the emerald isle, couldn't find much fun in life, and might just as well put an end to their miserable existence. Now, he would come under that category if he were foolish enough to thwart his uncle; and so, as he drove along, he reflected seriously on the matter, and determined to do his best to comply with Sir Geoffrey's wishes.

"It wouldn't be such a bad position, being master of all the splendid land that lay around—he was driving through property belonging to the Maynes—he thought, as he looked over the sunlit meadows, golden with buttercups, the hedgerows white with thick, clustering may, and dim lilac bloom.

Joined to the Eldon estate it would simply be a magnificent property, give the owner a foremost rank among the English landed gentry, and a rent-roll that would give every substantial comfort man could desire, and leave a big margin for follies, frivolities, and fads.

"I could keep a yacht," he pondered. "Uncle Geof has not a penny less than twenty thousand a-year, and if he decides on the heiress our income would be nearer thirty than twenty; and some racers, and build a theatre to the Court. Nothing is pleasanter than private theatricals during the winter, when one has a houseful of friends, and one or two shining lights of the stage amongst them. Then I should keep the preserves in perfect order," with a glance at a distant patch of leafage that proclaimed a wood, and another over the snow-flower-crowned hedge as a turnip-field; "and might be able to manage a pack of hounds, and altogether have a rollicking time of it!" and so on, and so on, till he reasoned himself out of his sullen mood into thorough good humour, as he went on through the verdant country, beautiful with its different shades and colour, its orchards white with bloom, its young-leaved trees, its bird-voices jubilant and gleeful; the sunlit river sparkling as it flowed along through the lush, emerald pastureland enamelled by daisies, whose silver frills the soft wind shook as it careered lightly by, and ruffled the murmuring waters so that the same sky reflected in it, as in a mirror, seemed ruffled and disturbed as well.

"Well, my boy, I am glad to see you!" exclaimed Geoffrey, with more warmth than usual, as Elton sprang from the phaeton, and grasped his outstretched hand.

"Thanks!" said the young man, simply. "Had a good journey?" queried the elder man, later on, as they sat at dinner, both in dress-coat and evening dress.

"Yes. Fairly good."

"Town full?"

"Overflowing!" responded the nephew, just a touch of annoyance in his tone.

"I suppose you did not like leaving it?" remarked Sir Geoffrey, glancing at him with his keen, grey eyes, shaded by bushy over-hanging brows.

"Not at all!" returned the young man, coolly, holding up his glass of comet claret to the light, and appearing to admire its rich, red colour.

"And yet you came?"

"Yes. I had no choice but to obey your request."

"Left all the lovely ladies, and the dandy swells that throng the streets and love to swelter and broil in the park, like Turks or dogs, at this time of the year—eh?"

"Yes!" less coolly, and more abruptly.

He didn't like the other's sneering tone and mocking face. His blood was hot, and easily boiled.

"To come and see an old uncle—eh! Tanned to the colour of an ancient hide, and about as tough!"

"I won't contradict about the hide, and the toughness, sir!" he said, curbing his feelings; "but—I came to see two charming demoiselles whose portraits you have painted so glowingly."

"Humph!" grunted the old man, still eyeing him. "You're candid."

"Surely you would not have me otherwise!" exclaimed Elton, with an expostulatory wave of the hand.

"No. I don't think I would!" acknowledged the other, frankly. "It was your independence and truthfulness that made me take a fancy to you as a boy, and adopt you instead of either of my other nephews!"

"I see."

"And now! As to this matter I wrote about!"

"Well," with a little restless movement of the fair head.

"Is it to be 'well'?"

"Do you mean do I intend to carry out your wishes?"

"Yes. Are you ready to marry?"

"No; I am not ready to marry!"

"Humph!"

"Still, if you wish it I will. I must bend my neck to the yoke."

"A pretty way, by Jupiter, of speaking of taking unto yourself a wife—such a pretty one too, as Mayne's daughter or niece would make!"

"It doesn't matter to a man how pretty the woman may be who is destined for him when he doesn't want to marry," said the young fellow, moodily, sawing away savagely at a pine.

"Spare the dish," said his uncle, regarding the silver vessel with anxious eyes. "It will be yours one day, I have little doubt now, along with everything else; still there is no necessity to destroy it because you are put out at the prospect of having to marry six months sooner than you would have if left to yourself."

"I certainly should not marry in six months if left to myself!" exclaimed the young man, angrily. "I hate the mere idea of being tied to one woman for the whole of my life!"

"I daresay you do, my boy. You're fickle and a bit vain, and no end of a flirt, and you'll have to settle down and mind *les convenances* more when you're a Benedict than you do now."

"It's not only that," he went on, "but one never knows what a woman may turn into."

"What on earth do you mean?—that she will be transformed into a dog or a horse?"

"No, not exactly; though I believe they do sometimes become mules after marriage, as far as obstinacy is concerned. I mean, a girl courted is all honey and sweetness, and smiles; a wife very frequently is vinegar, sourness, and frowns, and nags and badgers a fellow to death!"

"What a picture!" chuckled Sir Geoffrey. "Why can't you look on the bright side of matrimony?"

"There isn't any bright side," he declared, obstinately; "it's all clouds and darkness!"

"Nonsense! Many men are perfectly happy married, and adore their wives."

"At any rate, you didn't try this pleasure you are recommending me so strongly, Uncle Geof," with a quick glance at him.

"No, my boy, I did not," he acknowledged, "and do you know why?"

"Because you feared the long tongues of the fair sex, I suppose?"

"No, Elton, it was not that. I was engaged, and my wedding-day fixed, and my promised bride was a sweet, fair young thing. I met her there," nodding his head towards the east, "and I think I should have been perfectly happy as her husband."

"Then why did you not marry her?" asked the young man, eagerly.

"She died!" answered the old man, sadly, a sudden melancholy in his keen eyes, and softening of his stern face.

"Of what?"

"Cooler. She was taken ill at eight o'clock at night, and died the next day at five, and was buried twenty-four hours later, on what would have been our wedding-morn!"

"Poor Uncle Geof!" stretching out his hand and laying it on his uncle's.

"Yes, Elton, you may well say that!" with a heavy sigh. "Her loss was a death-blow to all my hopes, the blessing of all that was young and genial in me! I seemed to wither up and become old, and crabbed, and sour; to care for nothing, to lose my interest in my fellows; in a word, to become what you know me as—a stern, hard, gloomy man."

"It is no wonder you should have altered!"

"No; and time has not healed the wound. I have never forgotten her—never can forget her! At times, when I am alone, I seem to hear her soft, sweet laugh; and the ring of her girlish tones, to see her blue, tender eyes fixed on me, and feel the touch of her little hands and warm lips, long since stiff and cold in death!"

"Time is supposed to soften grief."

"It may to some; not to me, who loved as I loved—may, as I love, for her memory is still inexpressibly dear to me! Nothing could ever make me forget her. When I think of her, as I saw her that glowing June day, lying in her bridal dress in her coffin, flowers strewn over the lifeless form, on the pileless breast, in the wax-like figure, the long lashes sweeping her white cheek, looking as though she slept, and had not left me for ever, the pang is just as keen and hard to bear as it was then."

The old man's voice faltered over the last words, and rising abruptly from the table he left the room.

"Poor Uncle Geof," murmured Elton, compassionately, throwing down his serviette and also rising. "Who would ever have thought there had been a romance in his life? One does stumble on to queer things in this world. Grim, stern, hard, I didn't think he could care for a woman, and here he has been faithful to the memory of one nearly fifty years," and thinking deeply he lit a cigar and strolled out on the smooth lawn that felt like velvet to the feet, and listened to the nightingale pouring forth a flood of silvery ripples and trills, worthy of the "poet bird" that sings of faithful love.

"Come, Elton, the horses are waiting," shouted Sir Geoffrey, the next morning, as his nephew came reluctantly down the broad oak staircase, looking a trifle sullen, it must be admitted, and yet handsome enough, in his jaunty, well-cut tweed suit and deerstalker, to win any woman's heart, no matter how fastidious or hard to please she might be.

"Time enough, uncle," he said, irritably. "We don't want to get there before luncheon-time. It's not twelve yet. Sorrel and Blue Peter will do it in half an hour."

"There's time enough for you, my boy," laughed the Baronet, grimly. "You're young, and have all your life before you. I'm growing old, and I confess I'm eager to have another glimpse of Gertrude Mayne's blue eyes; they put me in mind of those others I loved."

"That pretty well decides it," thought the young man, "I'm booked for the heiress."

"What a laggard in love you are!" went on the other, vaulting into the saddle with a grace and agility many youths might well have envied.

"Yes, I'm not keen on the sport," acknowledged Elton, mounting leisurely the sorrel mare, and putting her glossy neck.

"You had better cultivate a keenness, then," said his uncle, sternly, reining in the powerful iron grey he rode. "I will have no disrespect shown there ladies. Do one thing or the other. Refuse to comply with my wishes, and take the consequences, or do your best to woo and win your wife in a manly, honourable fashion."

"It is hardly likely I should treat them with disrespect," he answered, coldly, "I am a gentleman."

"I am glad to hear it, and I hope you'll act like one," retorted the Baronet.

"Do not fear. I shall bring no disgrace on our name in that respect," and then the two men rode on in silence, one with an angry heart and sense of annoyance that was intolerable to his

haughty spirit, the other chuckling secretly at the successful way in which he had brought Elsor to the point almost of proposing for one of the girls he desired so ardently for a niece-in-law.

Elsor was obliged to admit that Mayne Place was a beautiful house, and the garden and grounds beautifully kept, as they rode up the tanned drive to the imposing flight of marble steps leading to the door. He was also obliged to admit that the three female figures on the lawn were eminently graceful and elegant ones, though he didn't know who they were exactly, still he guessed them to be Miss Mayne, Miss Mervyn, and a friend.

"Mr. Mayne was at home, and would receive them," the butler informed them; "the ladies were in the garden."

Elsor felt a momentary sense of embarrassment as his uncle presented him to Mr. Mayne, and that gentleman turned his handsome blue eyes on him scrutinisingly, for he felt he was being studied to see if he would pass muster for a suitor for either daughter or niece; but he shook off the unpleasant feeling, and responded gracefully and easily to his host's remarks.

"The young ladies are in the garden, I hear!" observed Sir Geoffrey, after a little desultory conversation.

"Yes," responded Mr. Mayne, "shall we join them?"

"I think it would be a good move," answered the Baronet. "It looks charming out there!"

"It is charming. We spend a good deal of our time there this genial weather, especially now that we have a London guest staying with us."

"Ah, indeed! I saw your girls had a friend with them as we passed."

"Yes," Mrs. Linklater. Her husband's abroad, and she's been going to so many dances that she's knocked up a bit, so Gerty asked her down here for a while to see what fresh air and early hours will do towards restoring her strength."

Elsor, as he heard, silently cursed his fate.

Mrs. Linklater was a gay, frisky young matron, without an idea beyond dress, lovers, and admiration, which she was so greedy of that her friends (!) dubbed her the "Octopus," a name which clung to her pertinaciously. She was very pretty, very fast, and very unscrupulous, and was married to a rich man twice her age. She and Captain Eldon had met in town, and certain tender passages passed between them, sundry flirtations by moonlight, &c., and he well knew that she would expect these tender attentions renewed, which now in his present position as aspirant for the hand and heart of another he could not do. So it was with no small amount of embarrassment that he followed the elder man, and found himself bowing to the ladies and shaking hands with them, while three pairs of eyes were fixed on him with glances of no little curiosity. Gertrude Mayne's blue ones, Marguerite Mervyn's brown ones, and Dorothy Linklater's grey ones, and the latter were tender, melting with love's desire.

CHAPTER III.

"Gleaming through the beeches
Shines a golden light;
And my love is waiting,
Robed in purest white.
We will walk together,
Far beyond the trees,
Bathed in golden sunlight,
Rustling in the breeze."

"I think I know Captain Eldon," announced the grass-widow, smiling sweetly, and holding out a small, white hand, loaded with jewels, that Elsor was obliged to take, and which was left in his grasp until he felt he would rather it was a bear's, so that he could get rid of it.

"Yes; we have met in town," he acknowledged, constrainedly.

"We are quite old friends," with great emphasis, and another melting glance.

"Quite. I believe we met a year ago at Lady Patchouff's soirée!"

"Oh! surely longer ago than that!" she expostulated.

"I think not."

"It must be. We have met so often. We are quite old friends!"

"And so are we old friends of Captain Eldon's," laughed Gertrude Mayne, a mischievous light gleaming in her blue eyes. "We played blind man's buff with him when we could hardly toddle, and he was a naughty boy in a red tunic, and wanted all the sweetmeats himself!"

"Do you really remember that?" he asked, turning to her, a winning smile chasing the gloom from his face.

"I have a perfect recollection of it," she answered. "Especially the part where you appropriated all the goodies, leaving none for us!"

"Did I actually behave in such a beastly way?"

"You actually took all the chocolates," struck in Margaret Mervyn, in her full rich tones; "and it is no wonder Gerty remembers it, seeing that she would have liked them all herself!"

"Is that a fact, Miss Mayne?" asked Elsor.

"I dare say it is," she acknowledged, frankly.

"I am terribly fond of chocolates, even now; and I have no doubt that I was proportionately dismayed when I saw you appropriate them all, and that that has fixed the memory of the affair in my mind."

"Yes, I suppose so. What an opinion you must have held of me all those years!" with an admiring glance at the slight, graceful figure in its robe of purest white, and the beautiful head with its crown of burled hair.

"You never gave us a chance of altering it, you see," she replied, with another merry, mischievous glance.

"No. I am afraid I have been remiss in calling," he acknowledged, a slight accession of colour in his bronzed cheeks.

"You, have, slightly."

"Then my profession, of course, is a great tie. My regiment has been in India for some years."

"Yes."

"I know my uncle has made up for my remissness of late, at any rate."

"Yes, he has been here often, and we are always glad to see him."

"So he tells me. His happiest hours are passed here."

"It is very good of him to say so," said his young hostess.

"I can't wonder," answered Elsor, gallantly, his old feeling of admiration for the fair sex coming out strongly again now that he was brought face to face with beautiful women, and forgot for the moment the dark matrimonial cloud that hung over him. "I can quite understand a man feeling perfectly happy here!" and he gave her a meaning glance, and she met it; and as the grey eyes gazed into the blue each seemed to get an insight into each other's nature.

"He is a flirt!" she decided.

"Miss Mayne is an undoubted coquette!" he thought.

"Captain Eldon, is it really true," struck in Mrs. Linklater, in her childish voice, "that your regiment comes to Cleburn next week?"

"Perfectly true."

"And how long do you think the charming Piffaras will be stationed there?" with a little affected twitch at her draperies.

"A year at least."

"How delightful!"

"Perhaps longer."

"That will be enchanting!"

"Why! Are you going to remain in this neighbourhood?"

"Yes, it agrees with me so well that I think of taking a house here while Frank is away."

"Ah! Have you seen one you like?"

"Two."

"But you can't live in two houses."

"Of course not," promptly. "Only I don't know which I like the better of the two."

"Or rather," put in Miss Mervyn with a queer unfathomable look in her dark eyes, as she turned them on the little fluffy-haired, extravagantly dressed woman, "you can't make up your mind as to which you like the better of the two."

"Perhaps that is it, Captain Eldon, I shall

count upon you to help me with your excellent —. You must help me to decide."

"I shall be most happy," returned the Captain smiling, and looking at the pretty, coquettish flirt, who was doing her best to reestablish old relations between them—jangle him once more in the mesh of her rosy toils.

"Then will you drive over to Galthorpe to-morrow with me, and if you have time we can look at Gunley House also!" with an upward glance of the soft, grey eyes.

Mrs. Linklater's eyes were lovely, and upward glances from them telling.

"Certainly, if you wish it."

"I wish it very much," in low tones, meant only for his ear.

"Miss Mayne," he said, coolly turning to Gertrude, "I am sure you are a good judge of a cosy house. Won't you help your friend in her decision and come too, to-morrow?"

"I have been twice already," she responded, laughing, and looking at Dorothy, "and I don't think my opinion would influence Mrs. Linklater the least little bit in the world."

"Gerty, how can you!" murmured that lady, affectedly, feeling slightly wrathful that Elson should show so plainly that he did not care for a *tête à tête* drive with her through rural lanes and rustic scenes, and determining to make him pay for it somehow or the other.

"Still two or three heads are better than one," he urged.

"Not if they haven't much brain in them," interposed Miss Mervyn, who felt an unreasonable sense of annoyance whenever the fair Dorothy turned the full artillery of her charms on Elson, which she did very frequently.

"That is a grave insinuation," remarked the soldier, with affected gravity, looking at Marguerite, and wondering why he didn't admire dark women, being fair himself, and admitting that her dark loveliness had something very quietly and noble about it; for all that, he preferred looking into Gertrude Mayne's blue eyes, or Dorothy Linklater's grey ones.

"I did—not—mean, of course, that you," she began, stammeringly, while a hot flush mounted to her dusky cheeks.

"Had a skull, devoid of brains," put in Miss Mayne.

"I hope not," rejoined the Captain, "as I have no means by which I can assure you that it is replete with those useful things."

"Act like a philosopher," went on Gerty, wickedly; "show none of the faults and failings of youth. Be stiff, and stern, and sober, and circumspect in every way, and by those means you will be able to convince my critical eye that you are not empty-pated and frivolous," this last with a little pointed glance at the grass widow, who was smoothing out her dainties with dainty white digits and downcast eyes, and, therefore, did not see it.

"Gertrude, how can you talk like that!" expostulated Miss Mervyn, in evident distress.

"What will Captain Eldon think of me?"

"That you are Minerva, Juno, and Solomon rolled into one," answered the lively heiress, her blue eyes actually dancing with fun at the idea of shocking her more sedate and stately cousin.

"Perhaps Captain Eldon does not care for Minerva-like women, in fact—blue stockings," put in Mrs. Linklater, innocently, with just a glance—a rapid, fleeting glance—under her long lashes, at Marguerite Mervyn's statuerque face, that was not altogether kindly.

"Possibly he doesn't," put in Miss Mayne, quickly. "What man really does! And there is the luncheon bell," she added, and they strolled off towards the house, Elson walking by her side, Sir Geoffrey chatting to Marguerite, and Mr. Mayne escorting his fair guest, for there was little kindly feeling between Miss Mervyn and Mrs. Linklater.

The former was a noble woman, nobly planned; the latter, a pretty, frivolous, not to scrupulous flirt—a woman who would do anything to compass her ends, who was not particular as to her conduct, who took presents

from men other than her husband, and openly displayed these trophies of her chase in the boudoir of her dainty house in Mayfair, who made up her delicate complexion with skilful touches of rouge and *poudre de riz*, and dyed her low-coloured hair till it assumed a sunny tint, and pinched her waist, and spent a large slice of her time with her milliner and dress-maker, and who, when attired and "dressed" for the fray, was certainly an extremely nice-looking little personage, most fascinating and dangerous to members of the opposite sex; looking not a day more than two-and-twenty, though she was quite ten years older than that, and innocent and mirthful as a kitten, successfully hiding under a childish manner her savoir-faire and general knowledge and flightiness.

Miss Mervyn did not like her, and was too honest to hide it. Miss Mayne, on the contrary, was partial to her, and amused by her affectations and audacities, and insisted, in her usual wilful way, on asking her frequently to Mayne Place; invitations that were not always accepted by the fast, little blonde, who generally found better and more congenial sport elsewhere, but, hearing that the Piffers were going to be stationed at Clemer, and seeing that the shadows under her soft, grey eyes were beginning to deepen, Mrs. Linklater had accepted Gertrude's invitation, and was likely to prove an obstacle in the way of Elson's wooing the heiress.

"Isn't it a lovely day!" sighed the grass widow, ecstatically, the next morning, as, attired in the neatest of tailor-made costumes, she stepped into Gertrude's pony phaeton, and sank down into the seat beside that for the driver, which she knew would be Captain Eldon.

"Yes; it isn't bad," said Miss Mayne, coolly, as she got in after her, followed by Elson. "Margaret" to her cousin, who stood on the steps seeing them off, "you are a goose not to come."

"Cannot," returned Miss Mervyn. "My correspondence has got sadly into arrears."

"Well, leave it for another day."

"No," she murmured. "There are some letters that I must answer this morning."

"Billet-doux!" muttered the fair Dorothy, as Eldon gathered up the reins, and the pair of skew-bald ponies set off at a smart trot.

"Detestable woman!" said Miss Mervyn, half-aloud, as the pony phaeton disappeared in the distance. "What is it about her that fascinates every man? I suppose it must be her fastness. Only—I am surprised at Captain Eldon; he should have better taste," and, with an impatient sigh, she turned, and going into the house, sought the pretty morning-room where Gertrude shared in common, and sitting down, tried to write her letters.

But an unwanted restlessness pervaded her whole being; she could not settle down, and between her gaze and the paper would come a handsome, bronzed face, with a heavy, fair moustache and grey eyes; and in her ears would ring the melodious tones of Elson Eldon's voice.

"It is absurd," she said, at last, with a half-laugh and a little gesture of annoyance. "Just as though I was in love with him, and I have known him four-and-twenty hours," and then she threw down her pen, and, calling her deer-bound, Turcoman, got a hat, and went out for a stroll in the grounds.

CHAPTER IV.

"Oh, for youthful lovers
Sunny days are sweet!
And the sun's bright radiance
Gladly now we greet.
Let the moon's pale sceptre
Colder mortals sway,
But for youthful lovers
Give a summer's day!"

"Well, what do you think of it?" Mrs. Linklater stood in the drawing-room at Galthorpe, right in the middle of the room, and the bright sunshine streamed in on her through four of its seven great windows, making a sort of halo round the fair head, and shining in the

grey eyes and on the delicate skin and dainty figure.

"Charming!" exclaimed Gertrude.

"Perfect!" added Eldon.

"You really think so!" looking at him.

"Really. It is a perfect house, perfectly appointed."

"Hardly large enough," she objected, throwing a disparaging glance round the big room.

"Not large enough!" echoed Gertrude Mayne.

"Why, Dorothy, what sort of a place do you want? A barrack!"

"A near hit that," thought Elson. "A barrack would just suit her, if she thought she could garrison it with her pet officers."

"No," said Mrs. Linklater, slowly, "only I want a house large enough to enable me to ask sufficient people to form a good audience when I give my private theatricals. Now, there are not enough bedrooms here."

"Fifteen good ones," expostulated the heiress, "and ten smaller ones, besides the servants'. Surely that ought to be enough!"

"At the outside that would only accommodate thirty people."

"A very fair number for a house-party."

"Perhaps. Not for an audience, though."

"But you know you can always put some of the lesser lights amongst the men to roost in the village, or even at the Lodge, or turn the harness-room over the stables into a bedroom at a pinch," suggested Eldon.

"Yes. So I might," agreed the grass-widow, brightening visibly. "Not at all a bad idea. If they wouldn't mind."

"I have slept more than once in a harness-room," declared the Captain.

"In good houses!" inquired Mrs. Linklater, who despite all her money, and her assumption of fashion and importance, was only a *nouveau riche*, and not "up" in the ways of the *beau monde*, therefore always afraid of making a false step.

"Yes, very good. Lady Galway's, the Duchess de Lafitte's, and Mrs. Sanson's. All women of ton."

"Oh, yes! Mrs. Sanson would do nothing that was not *comme il faut*."

"No. Nor her Grace of Lafitte," chimed in Gertrude, with a smile.

"Besides, there is the theatre. Few houses have that attached to them," remarked Elson.

"No, that is true. We must go and take another look at it," and the trio left the dainty dressing-room all pale blue satin and plush, and filmy laces, and made their way down the long Saramolin marble corridor that led to the theatre.

It was perfectly appointed in every respect. The seats good, giving a fair view of the stage; the draperies pretty, the drop-scene artistic, and the "properties" numerous and in good order. In fact, the second inspection of the miniature temple of comedy and tragedy proved so satisfactory that Mrs. Linklater decided upon taking the house, and signified her intention to the agent, who was waiting for her decision with due and becoming humility in the retirement of the library; after which they re-entered the phaeton and drove back to Mayne Place, arriving there just in time to dress for dinner, at which meal Mrs. Linklater's new home was discussed at length.

Apparently, Captain Eldon found the fluff-haired, flirty little woman amusing, for he joined her after dinner, and seating himself beside her, commenced an animated conversation.

In fact, she did amuse him. Her anecdotes were racy, her chatter incessant, and it diverted his thoughts from the impending marriage that loomed darkly on his horizon, and made him feel just a little awkward with Marguerite and Gertrude.

Neither Sir Geoffrey nor Mr. Mayne noticed his attention to her, nor thought anything of it, for, being a married woman, they thought she was safe.

In that they showed their woful ignorance, for really she was a dangerous rival to the two maidens, and not being in the matrimonial market held a special charm for Captain Eldon; besides, she was unscrupulous, and when a

woman abided by a good man's name is that she can do a vast amount of harm. At any rate she meant to monopolise the handsome *husband* if she could, for she rather more than fancied him, and was, moreover, flattered at having such a handsome string to her bow, and exerted herself to fascinate and please him.

"You will come to Galthorpe very, very often," she was murmuring, "when your regiment is at Clemer!"

"Need you ask?" he responded in the same tones. "I shall come as often as I may."

"You may come every day, when you cannot stay altogether there."

"My duties will put that out of the question, you know, unfortunately. After my present long leave of absence the chief won't be inclined to let me have much more until the autumn."

"Then do you intend making stay at Eldon Court?" inquired Mrs. Linklater, looking at him lastly through her long lashes, though, in reality, she was keen to hear his answer.

"About a month. I have spent some weeks in town already."

"And then you rejoin your regiment at Clemer?"

"Yes."

"Your uncle will be glad to have you near him."

"He professes himself so," returned the young man, a dark cloud falling over his handsome face.

"And others will be glad as well," she murmured, with *empressment*, adding to herself, "I'll bet a dozen of Jovian's best old men wants him to marry one of those girls—the heiress for choice. Galthorpe is only four miles from Clemer," she went on, aloud.

"Just a pleasant ride over," he agreed.

"Yes; I hope you will take the 'pleasant ride' very often!"

"You may depend on it I shall," he returned, easily, and the grey eyes met those other grey ones so full of fire, and a look passed between them that Gertrude Mayne, crossing the room towards them, saw and wondered at; and then, with a conscious and affected lowering of the eyelids, Dorothy Linklater bent down her head and played with her fan, while she said,—

"Of course, I shall get up some private theatricals as soon as I can get a sufficient number of people together. Now I want you to promise that you'll play *Claude Melnotte*!"

"Of course I will, to Miss Mayne's Pauline!" he added, audaciously, as she approached them.

"What are you saying, taking my name in vain?" she asked, gaily, flashing a glance at him from her beautiful blue eyes, that somehow or other made his pulses throb as never look of Dorothy Linklater's had.

"I was saying I would play *Claude Melnotte* at Mrs. Linklater's theatricals if you would play *Pauline*. Will you?"

"Of course I will. Delighted to. Dorothy, when will they come off? When are you going to begin, and make arrangements about them?"

"Oh, you whirlwind!" laughed Dorothy, languidly, not altogether well pleased that her sickle head should wish to play the part of lover to handsome Gertrude Mayne, and yet conscious that she was too short for the part, not majestic enough; her nose, too, a trifle too much tilted towards Heaven to make her a good exponent of the fair Pauline. "I am not at Galthorpe yet."

"No, but you soon will be," retorted the heiress, "if you continue as much in love with your new house as you were this morning."

"Perhaps," with a flirt of the white feathers in her hand.

"Well, don't you think you had better fix July?"

"Yes, if you like," indifferently.

"What do you think, Captain Eldon?"

"Oh, decidedly July. Town will be emptying by that time, and Mrs. Linklater will be able easily to get a house full of people."

"Possibly," she drawled, trying to hide her annoyance at his evident and rather sudden wish to please Miss Mayne, "only you forget the rehearsals. We shall want to begin within the next fortnight, to be perfect by the end of

July. My friends won't leave town until the season is over, and they will hardly feel willing to come a hundred and fifty miles two or three times a week to attend rehearsals."

"No, of course not," agreed Elsor, readily and amiably, anxious to have the theatricals take place at any cost, for it had just struck him it would be rather pleasant to play the part of lover to Miss Mayne in the safe character of Claude Melnotte, if not on his own account; "but why not have the cast from people in the neighbourhood?"

"I don't know many people about here," she objected, feeling she was being driven into a corner.

"Miss Mayne does, and the Piffers come to Glenur very soon now. I know Dethfoll and Methune will join our company with something more than pleasure; and Denbigh of the Blues is staying at Stoneham with his aunt, the Countess. He is capital at private theatricals, and as handsome a fellow as you could possibly wish to see."

"Secure him by all means, then," she exclaimed, beginning to thaw at this prospect of a new admirer. "But will he be remaining in the neighbourhood long enough to permit of his joining us?"

"Yes. He has six months' sick leave."

"Now what is the use of an invalid!" she asked, angrily.

"Oh! it's lung disease you know; doesn't incapacitate him at present, and the pine forests about Stoneham will do him no end of good."

"Will his medical adviser allow him to go into society?"

"I do not know whether he will allow him or not," laughed Elsor, with that easy, half-impudent familiarity of manner that men adopt towards married women whom they think are not worthy of much respect; "but I do know that Denbigh will never give up amusement while there is a kick in him, and will die, most likely, in war-paint or harness!"

"How dreadful!" exclaimed Gertrude, involuntarily.

"What?" asked Elsor.

"To think of a man taking no care of himself, and dying suddenly in a ball-room, or on parade!"

"It is a little ghastly," and Mrs. Linklater shivered. She did not like the idea of death, and six feet of earth; poor painted, frivolous little mortal!

"He is not likely to die just at present," returned the Captain, consolingly, "so we may as well ask him; he will be such an addition!"

"Very well, do as you like," agreed Dorothy.

"What are you all conferring about?" asked Miss Mervyn, joining them.

"Private theatricals," answered Gertrude.

"Mrs. Linklater is going to give some at her house," explained Elson, looking at Marguerite's olive skin, smooth and clear, her lovely mouth, chiselled features, and abundant dusky hair, and long lashed, molting brown eyes, and admitting, to himself, that she was uncommonly handsome.

"I see," she said quietly.

"Captain Elson is going to play the part of my lover," exclaimed the little flirt, audaciously.

"Is he?" answered Marguerite, indifferently; but a sudden pain, the first of many and many an after twinge, shot through her heart at the thought that this man, whom already she admired so deeply, should act, even in a piece, the part of lover to this frivolous little creature, whom, in her secret heart, she detested.

CHAPTER V.

"One with azure eyes,
And silken robe of flowing white,
And ornaments of pearl and costly lace,
And beautiful wealth of waving corn-boned hair,
The other with open looks and dusky eyes,
And gleam of diamond light on breast and brow."

"Well, Elson, have you made up your mind yet, which is the fairest of the fair?" asked Dudley Desmond.

"No, I haven't," answered Elson, shortly.

He was struggling with a refractory shirt button, and felt out of temper; for it was already past the hour fixed for Mrs. Linklater's rehearsal, and they had to drive four miles.

"I wish you'd make up your mind soon."

"Do you?"

"Yes."

"Perhaps I will, to oblige you, then."

"Do, by all means."

"I can tell you one thing," as he put the last touch to his tie, and dashed himself into a light overcoat. "I admire Miss Mayne most, though I am quite willing to allow that Miss Mervyn is as handsome, if not handsomer!"

"Them's my sentiments," muttered Desmond, as he followed his friend out of their quarters and got into the dog cart, that whirled them rapidly towards Galthorpe.

And later on as he stood in the blue satin drawing-room watching the gay throng, and more particularly the hostess and her cousin, he felt that his friend had a difficult task in choosing.

Gertrude, with her sunny blue eyes, golden hair, and exquisite complexion, was very fair and sweet; while the more majestic Marguerite, with her queenly figure and noble dark face, was fascinating in the extreme to him. He hardly knew it himself, but he was deeply in love with her, and dreaded lest Elsor's choice should fall on her. In truth, he need not have feared, for the young man had decided on choosing Gertrude.

During the long hot summer days they had often met at Galthorpe and Mayne Place; and his love had grown and grown until all his objections to matrimony vanished, and he was only eager to hear her say "yes" to his pleading. He was not sure she loved him. Gertrude was proud and a coquette, and something of Sir Geoffrey's plans had come to her knowledge; and though she loved with all the fervour and power of her young heart she would not show it, only treated him to good doses of disdain, tempering them occasionally with a little kind treatment so that he might not be frightened away altogether.

To-night she was talking in an animated fashion to Cecil Denbigh, who admired her immensely, and paid her marked attentions, of which Elson was madly jealous, though the poor fellow had one foot in the grave, and could hardly spare time to give the Captain two fingers, whereas he was greatly enraged, and revenged himself by flirting outrageously with Mrs. Linklater.

Gertrude appeared sulkily indifferent to this, but Marguerite fixed her large melancholy eyes on him with a curious expression in their dusky depths, and her replies to Desmond were disjointed and irrelevant.

However, Elsor got his opportunity at last, and seized on it. He played the part of Claude in the most impassioned style, and when the rehearsal was over, coolly tucked her hand under his arm, and led her to the picture gallery, a great room with long windows from ceiling to floor, and cushioned seats in them. It was dark save for the moonlight that streamed in chequered patches on the polished floor, and threw the distant corners into black shades.

"Aren't you afraid to come into this dark place," she asked, with a little laugh that had just a shade of embarrassment in it, as he led her to one of the window seats.

"I should not be afraid of anything while with you!" he responded, in a tone of badinage. "Your beauty and goodness would exorcise evil spirits."

"I did not mean in that way," she said, with a gesture of dissent of the white hand.

"What then?"

"The place is not lighted."

"Well!"

"Mrs. Linklater evidently did not mean the place to be used to night as a promenade."

"Or a resort—for lovers," he said, audaciously.

"Don't you tremble at the prospect of her wrath?"

"No. Why should I?" looking at her steadily.

"She seems such a very dear friend to you."

"She is a friend, certainly; about being very dear I don't know," dubiously.

"And if you did you wouldn't own to it."

"Perhaps not," coolly. "But—I don't want to talk about her. Let us talk of ourselves."

"What an uninteresting subject!" with another forced laugh, and a tremble of the white hands that he boldly 'prisoned' in his.

"Do you really think I am an uninteresting subject?" he asked, bending down and looking into the blue eyes, where the moon-beams lingered lovingly.

"Of course."

"Now, Gertrude," calling her for the first time by her Christian name, "is that the truth or a fib?"

No answer.

"Tell me!" bending still lower.

"Gerty," with his lips close to her shell-like ear, "do you know—I love you!"

She trembled at this, a thrill of delight and triumph running through her from head to foot.

"Won't you answer!" throwing one arm round her shoulders. "Won't you tell me if you care to know this?"

"Yes, I care," she said softly.

"And you do not think me presumptuous?"

"No."

"And," hesitatingly, "do you—can you—give me a little in return?" pleadingly.

"All the love of my heart," she answered suddenly, and with such intense passion in their silvery tones that he was amazed.

"My darling! Is it possible you care for me so much?" he murmured, drawing her closer to him.

"So much that life would be worthless to me unless you cared for me!" resting her face on his bosom with a long-drawn sigh of ecstasy, while her heart beat heavily against his.

"Dearest! What happiness for me!" he exclaimed, rapturously. "Do you know I half-fear you did not care for me."

"Why?" she asked, raising her eyes and meeting the fond passion of his.

"Because you often snubbed me, and seemed to repel my advances."

"That is only a woman's way when she wishes to hide her love from a man," she explained, with a lovely blush, and droop of the white lids.

"And why did you wish to hide your love from me, darling?" he inquired, tenderly.

"Because—because," she stammered.

"Because what?" he demanded.

"I thought you were in love with someone else!"

"In love with someone else!" he echoed.

"Who?"

"Dorothy—Linklater," she replied, reluctantly.

"Mrs. Linklater!" with a laugh that was not wholly free from embarrassment, and a deep flush that mounted up to his brow. "How could you think that?"

"You paid her a considerable amount of attention, Captain Elson," the jealousy that was the one failing in her sweet nature breaking out.

"Call me Elsor," he whispered, tightening his clasp round her waist.

"Elsor," she repeated, in low tones.

"You know she is only a flirt," he went on, by way of excuse and explanation.

"I know she is a coquette; still your intercourse was marked by a certain amount of tenderness."

"No, really. I paid her only those attentions that a man naturally pays to a pretty woman; and, moreover, when she is his hostess he can't always get out of doing so."

"Especially when he doesn't want to," she put in.

"Now, Gerty," bending down till his passion-filled eyes gazed straight into the blue depths of hers, "do you think for one instant she can be compared in any way to you?"

"She is an extremely pretty woman, chic, and taking, and I know well, is always admired by men, and exercises a sort of fascination over them."

"She may be pretty, but you are lovely," he declared, passionately, and drawing her to him, he kissed the beautiful lips again and again.

"You are a flatterer," with a soft smile.

"No; I speak the truth. If you could only see yourself now you would say so. With the moonlight streaming down on your white gown and your white skin, you look like an angel, a spirit from the other world, something ethereal."

"Don't," she said, suddenly, with a slight shiver, laying her fingers on his mouth.

"Don't what?" he asked, in surprise.

"Say I look like a spirit from the other world."

"Why not?"

"Because," she answered, slowly, while a look of deep melancholy spread over the beautiful face, "I am superstitious."

"Superstitious! Of what?" he asked, in bewilderment.

"Of dying early."

"Gerty!" pressing her to him closely.

"I am not strong," she went on quietly. "Sometimes I think—I feel that I shall die young."

"My dearest," he implored, "do not talk like this!"

"My mother died before she was twenty-one," she continued, dreamily, her eyes fixed on the landscape silvery by the moon's cold beams.

"Of what?" he exclaimed, involuntarily.

"Consumption."

"You are not consumptive, Gerty!" with an anxious look at her pale, pure, delicate face.

"I have never shown any symptoms of it; but the germs of the fatal disease, of course, must be in my system, and might develop at any moment."

"You must not talk like this, or think of such things," he said, firmly. "Your life will be one that will be not likely to induce consumption. On the contrary, in a few years you will feel quite strong and healthy."

"Perhaps," she said, wistfully, turning her soft eyes upon him; "but—if any sorrow comes I feel I should not bear up against it."

"No sorrow will come," he returned, confidently. "Your father is still a comparatively young man, hale and hearty. Your life will be always one of ease and luxury; there is nothing to fear in the way of sorrow."

"And you will love me always?" throwing her fair arms round his neck. "Faithfully and truly while life lasts?"

"Yes, dearest," he answered, fervently; "faithfully and truly while life lasts!" and he sealed the vow with a long, clinging kiss.

"And now, as you are my promised wife," he said, after awhile, "I must give you a pledge of our betrothal," and he drew from his finger an old-fashioned ring, a huge opal surrounded by brilliants, and placed this unlucky stone for lovers on the third finger of her left hand.

"Thanks, dear!" she said gently, looking at it intently. "What a curious ring!"

"Yes; it is very old, and has been in my family for centuries."

And then, with a sudden chill at his heart, he remembered that when his uncle gave it him he told him it was the ring he had given the dead girl, to whom he had pledged his troth years before in India; and Elsie would fain have taken it back, but he feared to rouse her recently laid superstitions, and so let her keep the unlucky love-pledge, and led her back to the drawing-room, a proud light shining to his handsome eyes.

Meanwhile, another love scene was being enacted on the terrace that ran outside the house.

Against the balustrade leaned Dudley Desmond, and by his side stood Marguerite Mervyn, her queenly head held erect, her beautiful, dusky face deathly pale.

"I have startled you," he was saying, in low tones. "Perhaps when you have time to think you will answer differently—answer as I wish you to."

"No, Captain Desmond," she answered, in

clear, distinct tones, "time will make no difference in my reply. Do not hope that."

"I cannot cease to hope while you remain unwed," he urged.

"I can never be your wife."

"Is—it—quite—impossible?"

"Quite," she replied, firmly.

"You know so little of me, but my love is so great; for the sake of it you might alter—might be able to return it in the future. Won't you try?"

"Captain Desmond, you paid me inexpressibly," she murmured, turning her dark eyes on him with an unfathomable expression in them.

"And you—Miss Mervyn—do you realise what this refusal—is to me?" he asked, in faltering, husky tones, fixing a burning glance on her.

"I hope you will forget me soon."

"Never—while my life lasts! Oh, will you not try to care for me?" he cried, despairingly. "Your love is the one thing that will make my life worth living. Give me only a crumb of comfort."

"I cannot."

"You will not. You are pitiless!"

"Ah, do not say that," she implored. "I could not do you the bitter wrong of becoming your wife, having no affection to give you."

"I will be content with anything. Mere kindness, mere toleration," he urged eagerly.

"You think so now," she said sadly, "but after you would want more, and feel the want terribly."

"Let me try!" he pleaded.

"No, I cannot."

"I am willing to wait—willing to serve as Jacob did for Rachel. The love will come."

"No—never. I could give you nothing in return for the wealth of affection you would lavish on me, neither now nor in the future!"

"You speak very decidedly," he said, checking the fiery torrent of his passion, and speaking steadily. "Is it possible you care for someone else?"

"You have no right to ask!" lifting her head with a queenly and haughty gesture.

"No right but that my boundless love gives me," he said, sadly. "If I thought you loved another as I love you, I would never ask you to be my wife again."

"Then learn the truth," she cried, suddenly, while a deep blush mounted to the roots of her soft dark hair. "I love another, even as you love me, as hopelessly, as intensely."

"Is it possible?" he murmured, "you who are so proud, so reserved?"

"Yes, it is possible," she answered, bitterly. "Even I, with all my pride, love a man who is utterly indifferent to me—who has not a single thought to give me—who is wrapped up in another. You understand now why I cannot be your wife! I could not stand at the altar by your side, and pledge my faith to you while in my heart rages a passion that is like a tropical tempest, that wrecks, ruins and destroys!"

"Yes, I understand," he said, slowly and heavily. "I would I could help you."

"No one can do that," she answered, sadly.

"Save the man you love! Oh, Marguerite, if only I were he!" with a sob in his voice, and then, kissing her hands tenderly, he murmured "good-bye," and, turning, left her.

In the blue sky the moon hung like a resplendent lamp surrounded by the stars, each in its golden throne. The heavy perfume of the roses, and tall white lilies, blent and made the night air sweet, and Philomel was warbling to his mate. Marguerite stood with her face buried in her hands, and then, with a long drawn sigh, she drew them forward with a gesture of despair, while the diamonds on her breast and brow sparkled brilliantly, and murmured, "Oh, Elsie, if only you had spoken so to me," and the night wind went sighing by, and then all was still, hushed to the sweet, warm, languorous quiet of a summer's night.

CHAPTER VI.

"And on his arm, her hand light clasped in his, a girl. They walk the glade, his face low bent to hers; And she, the watcher, holds her breath to hear The voice she loves, the low and tender tones, Her life's one matchless melody and hears, 'Dearest to me than all created things; Oh, love of mine, I never loved till now!'"

THE announcement of Captain Eldon's engagement to Miss Mayne gave universal satisfaction, with two exceptions, and those were Miss Mervyn, who however concealed her dissatisfaction so well that no one guessed at it, and Mrs. Linklater, who felt unreasonably wrathful at her favourite becoming the avowed possession of another, and that other a younger and more beautiful woman than herself. The little woman raged in secret, and stalked with the gallant Captain, who, feeling that he had gone rather far in his flirtation with the pretty butler's girl, did all in his power to soothe her feelings without doing anything that might be disagreeable to his intended, to whom he was deeply attached.

He had, however, a difficult game to play.

His fiancée was exacting; her great love for him made her so. She was jealous of his attentions, his affection, his devotion, and liked him to be always chained to her side, where he was quite willing to be. But the "Octopus" was determined not to relinquish her prey easily. In truth, the foolish, unprincipled little woman had let her affections stray from her ugly, middle-aged, grey-haired, absent husband to this handsome young soldier, and as she could not marry him herself, seeing that she was already bound by the nuptial chain, she did not see why his marriage should make any difference in their friendship, and plainly told him so. He, foreseeing unpleasant complications, temporised with her, seeking to keep her quiet until he was Gertrude's husband, and better able to keep her at bay.

Meanwhile the preparations for the theatricals went on apace. Galthorpe was crammed with friends. All the long galleries alive with mirth, ringing with the muffled sweet voices, and sweeter laughter.

So there were diners nightly, and music and charades and impromptu dances and flirtations galore, and all the time Elsie was wishing that it was over, and he quietly at Eldon Court with his bride, who was to become his early in October.

Sir Geoffrey, delighted at the success of his matrimonial plans for his nephew, had given him a cheque for a thousand pounds, and promised to make him a handsome allowance on his marriage. And so the current of his true love ran smoothly for a while, and the young couple lived in a sort of terrestrial paradise, through which their feet strayed day by day; and as he whispered lover's nothings into Gertrude's ear, as they strolled side by side, his handsome head bent down over her, two pairs of eyes watched them. The grey ones with a baleful light in them, the brown ones sorrowfully; and while Marguerite Mervyn writhed in torture at the thought of having given her proud heart, unasked, into the keeping of her cousin's promised husband, Mrs. Linklater would array herself in joyous attire, and wreath her face in prettiest smiles and court his attention, and chain him to her side by artful manoeuvres, and vow in her heart that it would not be her fault if he ever married Gertrude Mayne.

Gertrude had faith in her lover, and simply worshipped him with a wild, idolatrous love that was almost sinful in its intensity, and yet, sometimes, when she would see him in a corner with Dorothy Linklater, giving him smiles and glances the while that would have made any woman jealous—a sudden coldness would seem to fall on her, the shadow of a doubt.

Dorothy contrived that there should appear to be no end of confidences between them—no end of whispered *à-tôtes*—an interchange of flowers and trifling presents; and she did it so cleverly that Elsie was blinded, and did not see how it would appear to the outside world, this interchange of courtesies and compliments with another man's wife. But when a bad woman

means to ruin the happiness of another she has no scruples, no bowels of compassion, and leaves no stone unturned, no effort untied, to gain her end.

At last the night of the private theatricals arrived. The pretty theatre was crammed with a brilliant throng of pretty women and good-looking men—an appreciative audience—for they clapped loudly and thundered applause as the *Lady of Lyons* proceeded, and Eldon, in the character of Claude Melnotte, made love to Gertrude as Pauline.

They acted with real fervour, true pathos, and as Elser played with her he little thought it was the last—last time he would ever look with a lover's gaze into her beautiful, bright blue eyes, the last time he would hold her soft hands in his, and whisper impassioned words in her ears.

Thunders of applause greeted the conclusion of the piece, and several bouquets were thrown at Gertrude, which her lover gathered and held for her, and then they both disappeared behind the curtain—she to don ball-dress for the dance that was to take place; he to change his dress to play in the little comediotta with Mrs. Linklater that was to conclude the theatricals.

It passed off with equal success, and then, as she in the last scene had donned a pale blue evening dress and he swallow tails, no further change was necessary. She got him out on the terrace on pretext of feeling faint, and when there stumbled and pretended to fall, and he was obliged to support her in his arms.

Just as he held her, apparently clasped to his breast, Gertrude stepped out on the terrace just behind them, and stood as though spell-bound, unable to move; and as she stood like a statue of marble, as white, as motionless, she heard Mrs. Linklater say something—what she could not catch—and then her lover with a low laugh, answered,—

"The best and dearest of women, of course, I never loved till now."

With a low, gasping moan, she turned away, a deathly coldness falling on her, "the chill of love-fire quenched for aye."

There was no longer any room for doubt. He was untrue to her, unfaithful, and as this woman he owned to loving was her friend, it made the insult all the greater.

A sudden frenzy of jealousy swept across the girl's heart as she heard the low, tender words, and in her desolation she sought the solitude of her own chamber; but ere long messages were sent to call her to the festive scene, and wearily she rose to obey the summons, her pride would not allow her to remain away.

Slowly she swept down the length of the long picture gallery, brilliantly lighted, but deserted save by the pictured beauties and dark-faced gallants who adorned the walls; and then, as she neared the further end, the door opened, and Elser came quickly towards her, the love-light shining in his eyes as they fell on the graceful figure, robed in a gown of soft white velvet, hardly whiter than the rounded arms and lovely throat it left bare—bare save for strings of pearls twisted round them. She held a great bouquet of snowy roses in her ungloved hands and a knot nestled at her breast. A beautiful exquisite creature she looked, yet not radiant or happy; and her cheeks were snowy as the roses, and her eyes heavy with the smart of unshed tears.

Elser went towards her with a smile on his lips and outstretched hands; but she, unable to conquer the fierce, jealous anger that burned in her heart, stood still, her beautiful head held proudly erect, her nostrils dilated, her eyes flashing.

He stopped instinctively too, seeing something was wrong.

"Gertrude, what is it?" he asked, his heart misgiving him.

"Dare you ask?" she demanded, haughtily.

"Dare I ask?" he repeated, amazedly.

"Yes. But you do; you would brzen out your falseness," she exclaimed, a sob in her voice.

"Gertrude, what do you mean?"

"That I have discovered your falseness, your untruth."

"I don't understand," he muttered.

"Then listen. I was out on the terrace half-an-hour ago, and I saw you with Dorothy Linklater in your arms, heard you tell her she was the best and dearest of women, and that you never loved until you loved her. Do you understand now? If not, listen a moment longer, and hear me tell you that I will never plight my troth to you, never become the wife of a man I could not fully trust and honour. Here is your ring," holding out the rainbow opal, with its flashing diamonds; "What, you will not take it!" as he stood motionless. "There—there," and she threw it at his feet. "Good bye," and turning swiftly, she left him, deaf to his cry of,— "Gertrude, love, listen to me!"

Gertrude could never remember distinctly what the rest of that wretched evening was like. She saw as in a dream flashing lights, glowing faces, gleaming jewels, heard soft music and happy voices, and knew she talked to those who addressed her, though she resolutely refused to dance.

Her lover never approached her once, but then on the other hand, he never went near his hostess, despite her sweet smiles and alluring glances, only stood moodily leaning against the wall staring apparently at nothing, and yet seeing distinctly the graceful figure in its robe of soft clinging velvet.

Once, as she looked at him, the pale lips murmured,—

"'You're the blame,' she said, and sighed;

'You're the blame for all I feel.'

She turned away upon her heel,

And saw him leave her wonder-eyed;

Then suddenly, with no good-bye,

Before the morrow came, she died."

And that was all.

Like one in a dream she bade adieu to those guests whom she knew, went slowly up to her room, going through the picture-gallery instead of by the corridors. At the window where Elser proposed to her she lingered a little space, looking at it with wistful eyes, and then went on to her room. As she looked at her reflection in the glass she started, it showed such a pallid, haggard, despairing face; and on the white lips was a streak of bloody foam.

She smiled sadly as she wiped it away; and then, taking off her white velvet gown, and laying aside the beautiful flowers, now withered and faded, she donned a simple morning dress, and put out a wisp.

She determined to leave Galthorpe at day-break. She would not stay a minute longer than absolutely necessary under the roof of the woman who had robbed her of her lover. Neither did she wish to meet the man who had been false to her again, and so she prepared; and, as the sun broke ruddy and shining through a dark background of clouds, she left her room, and, going softly through the corridors, went out by a side entrance.

Just as she closed the door she became aware that people were already about, and, slinking back into the shadow of a huge lilac bush, she waited.

In a few moments she saw the dog-cart go by with Elser Eldon and Dudley Desmond in it, and gathered from the disjointed parts of speeches made by them to some of the guests who had come to see them off that they had received a sudden summons to join their regiment.

In truth the Piffers were ordered out suddenly to South Africa, trouble having arisen; and four-and-twenty hours later the two young men were en route along with their regiment.

Gertrude stood pale, and shrinking for a time, and then collecting herself went slowly on. Four miles lay between her and her home, and she was weak and weary; her limbs seemed weighted with lead, but she struggled forward, and reached Mayne Place about nine o'clock.

Her father was just sitting down to breakfast. An exclamation of surprise and horror broke from his lips at the sight of this ghost of his beautiful, idolised child.

In a moment he knew something was wrong, but he made no remark, only kissing her, called

her old nurse, who still lived with them, and giving the tired girl into her charge, kindly advised her to lie down and try and sleep—advice which she took.

CHAPTER VII.

"Ah me, ah me! My one and only joy,
I did but jest as, wandering through the glade,
I whispered to another tale of love.
I little dreamed my tender love was near,
I little dreamed that words so lightly said
Would point an arrow at the heart I loved."

It was not long before Mr. Mayne, by the help of Marguerite Merwyn, found out what was wrong with his daughter. At first he thought it was grief at his sudden and unforeseen departure, but by degrees the whole sad, pitiful story came out—the story of wrong, of treachery, and deceit.

Both uncle and niece who so dearly loved the sorrow-stricken girl, felt terrible wrath against the worthless, heartless woman who had been the cause of the separation between Gertrude and her lover; and as they saw her day by day growing thinner and pale they urged on her a reconciliation, begged to be allowed to write and ask him if he could explain his extraordinary conduct, for, undoubtedly, he seemed to love her very dearly. This, however, her pride forbade, and so the matter remained a sort of mystery.

Sir Geoffrey was wild with rage, and threatened openly to cut him off with a shilling, and was only dissuaded from so doing by Miss Merwyn, who, true to the love she bore the absentee, stood up for him, and declared she was certain he was not as bad as appearances made him seem, and that she thought the matter could be satisfactorily explained.

To all this, Gerty answered never a word, only sat silent, looking out with her misty, wistful blue eyes at the distant range of hills.

Mr. Mayne grew terribly uneasy as he saw her delicate hands become daily more transparent, her cheeks thinner, the orbits of her eyes, hollower, her white face sharpened, having in mind the early death of his young wife, her mother; and at last, by the advice of a celebrated physician, he took her to Scotland, to a place of Sir Geoffrey's that he put at Mr. Mayne's disposal.

At first the fair invalid rallied a little in the pure, bracing atmosphere of the Highlands, and looked with faint interest at the blue hills, bedecked with sombre pines, and clothed in beautiful purple heather, seeming to rise almost to the heavens; at the broad stretches of moor, at tarn and brook, and the yellow gorse that bloomed golden in the sunrays. Then she fell rapidly away; a hacking cough distressed her, the faint, fugitive, wild-rose bloom faded from her face, leaving it a sickly pallor, alternating with a hectic flush; the lips assumed a blue tint, and no one could look on her and doubt but that she was falling fast.

The great motive power was gone. Elser was false. She did not care to live, preferring—nay, craving—for the oblivion, the quiet of the grave!

"If only I could die—forget and be forgotten," she murmured, restlessly, one morning, after a terrible fit of coughing that racked her wasted frame cruelly.

"Is there anything you wish for, my darling?" asked her father, who caught indistinctly the muttered words.

"Yes, father," she sighed, wearily, stretching out her arms to him. "Take me home, home—to—die!"

And he, heartbroken, and helpless to withstand the relentless foe, death, who was robbing him of his one earthly treasure, took her by slow and easy stages back to Mayne Place, making every effort to save her. But all was useless.

When the Lent lilies bloomed they bloomed on Gertrude's grave in the old churchyard on the cliff top, at whose base the waves washed ceaselessly, singing a dirge; and ere the year fell Mr. Mayne joined her there, and Marguerite was left sole mistress of his estate and fortune.

(Continued on page 232)

CLIFFE COURT.

CHAPTER XII.

SEPTEMBER came in with soft breezes, mellow air, and sunshine to bring out the gorgeous autumnal tints on the leaves, but evidently it had no intention of continuing such mildness, for before long a complete change took place in the weather, and for dullness and dampness it might have rivalled November itself.

The skies were one uniform expanse of slate-coloured clouds, hanging low over the sodden earth; rain fell in a continuous downpour that wetted you to the skin before you had been out a quarter of an hour; and the leaves, fluttering slowly to the ground, lay in little melancholy heaps, sadly suggestive of the coming winter.

The Chase looked dreary enough outside, and was very little better in; for the large, square rooms, with the old-fashioned furniture and fireless grates, gave one an eerie sense of desolation, and Sir Ascot was not wrong when he said his wife's boudoir was the most cheerful place in the house, and it therefore behoved her to keep to it.

Alicia had no desire to do otherwise, for a terrible lassitude had fallen upon her, making even the exertion of going out-of-doors too much for her.

Dr. West came every day, and in spite of her remonstrances, insisted on prescribing and sending constant supplies of medicine; and this, coupled with the fact of her rarely leaving her apartments, and never seeing visitors (for the Baronet had given stringent orders against their being admitted) soon induced the belief in the household that there must be something serious the matter with her.

It happened that just before Douglas was sent away her maid had left, and Sir Ascot, somewhat against her will, undertook to find her another; however, she did not trouble herself much about the matter, and in due time the new servant arrived—a middle-aged woman, with a dark, inscrutable face, and cold grey eyes, a woman with a history, but whose features were a mask that effectually concealed it, as well as her present thoughts and feelings.

Her name was Robson, and she speedily proved herself thoroughly conversant with the duties of a lady's maid, leaving her mistress nothing to complain of; but for all that, Alicia was conscious of a feeling that almost amounted to dislike towards her. She tried hard to master it, telling herself it was an unworthy prejudice, but there are certain instincts that defy reason, and this was one.

Two memories constantly haunted her—her child and Colonel Stuart, and there were times when she absolutely longed to know where the soldier was, whether—as was most probable—he had gone back to India, or if he was still in England.

That she had no right to think of him—that between them was a great gulf, which nothing but death could bridge across—she had told herself over and over again, as she strove with all her strength to crush the love that the sight of him had fanned into a flame of its original brightness.

As well might she have striven to stem with her foot the torrent of some mountain stream. The love was a part of herself, and to uproot it would be to tear out her own heart.

Sometimes, bereft of her child, existence seemed too hard to be borne. He had been the one link that held her, the one interest that bound her to life; and now the future stretched before her in a dim vista of years so hopeless that she drew back, shudderingly, from the prospect.

"Three score years and ten people sometimes achieve, and I am only twenty-three," she said to herself one afternoon, as she stood at the window, gazing out on the low skies, and listening to the dismal dripping of the rain on the stones below. "I have, perhaps, forty-seven more years to linger through. And yet there are some who cling to life as a goodly thing, from which they are loth to part. Oh, Heaven, how

willingly would I lay it down if it were not for little Douglas!"

She walked the length of the room, then came back to the window again. The wind was moaning through the branches and round the house with a strange sobbing sound that resembled a cry of despair.

"It is like a soul in pain," she murmured, with a shudder. "I think I must be getting full of strange fancies. Such ideas never need to strike me."

A sudden resolution took possession of her. She would go out in the air, and see if it did her any good.

Hitherto the rain had been quite sufficient excuse for Sir Ascot's insisting on her keeping indoors, and she had not experienced the slightest desire for leaving the house; but now she felt an untold longing to get clear of the Chase and its influence, and ten minutes later she was outside, wrapped in a waterproof, and with her umbrella up, hurrying along towards the high road.

She had no definite purpose in view; she only wanted to walk and get very tired, so that when she got home she might sleep. The nights had seemed so terribly long of late.

Before she had gone very far there came the odour of cigar-smoke close at hand, and she was conscious someone must be behind. A few seconds afterwards a voice, whose every inflection she knew, said,—

"Lady Carlyon, I am surprised to see you!"

It was Colonel Stuart, and she turned and gave him her hand, trembling too much to speak.

Ordinary greetings between these two seemed the veriest mockery, and they continued walking side by side for some distance in complete silence. At last the soldier said,—

"Last night I met your husband at the Molyneux, and he told me you were very unwell. His manner was so mysterious that it gave me the impression there must be something more than temporary indisposition the matter with you."

"I am not well," she answered; "but I don't know that I have any specific ailment."

He looked at her long and closely, noticing the shadowy hollows under the dark eyes, the pathetic quiver of the lips, and then turned away abruptly, checking the words that rose to his tongue.

He knew he must exercise a stern command over himself, but the sight of her wan face almost unmanned him.

It had come on to rain much faster now, a sudden storm that would probably not last long, but that was violent enough while it did last.

Colonel Stuart looked round to see if there was any shelter near, and caught sight of a shed just inside a field, the gate of which happened to be open.

"We had better go inside there for a few minutes until the shower is over," he said. "You will be wet through, and catch your death of cold if you stay out here much longer."

She obeyed the suggestion without remark, and he took from her her dripping umbrella, and closed it; then they both stood looking out on the dreary, tear-blotted landscape, shut in on all sides by a veil of mist.

"Do you remember the last time we were out for a walk together?" he asked, presently, in a tone that shook a little. "It was summer then, and the wild roses were in blossom. I picked you a spray, and you wore it in your dress, and as you put it in you told me how soon the flowers would fade—what a brief life theirs was. Our happiness resembled it."

Alicia turned away her head to hide the tears that had sprung into her eyes at the recollection.

"It is cruel of you to remind me of those days," she murmured, reproachfully.

"Is it?" he said, with a quick, impatient sigh, then he turned suddenly, and caught her hands in his, his breath coming very fast.

"Suppose they could return, Alicia—suppose fate threw us once more together, and the old,

happy days came back, bright with the sunshine that once lighted them!"

"What do you mean?" she exclaimed, her eyes widening, while she strove, but vainly, to release her hands from his grasp.

"I will tell you. Heaven knows I never meant to say these words to you, but a power stronger than my resolution compels me! Alicia, it was treachery that separated us—treachery that gave you to Sir Ascot Carlyon—treachery that forced you to utter the vows that made you his wife! Do you think such vows are holy in the sight of Heaven?"

She could only look at him mutely, and, indeed, he gave her no time to speak, for he continued,—

"Marriage, when it is the union of two hearts, is a sacred thing, ordained of Heaven, but marriage where only hands are joined is simply an institution of society, in which there is nothing sacred, nothing holy—a thing that is amenable to human laws, and that the ruling of a judge in a Divorce Court can set aside! Of such a class is yours with Sir Ascot Carlyon. To whom, therefore, do you think you belong—the man whose lies deceived you, and who cares nothing about you, or the one who loves you with his whole heart and soul—who would willingly lay down his life to secure your welfare?"

He was terribly excited—his face had flushed, his lips trembled. She could feel the quick beating of his pulses as his hands pressed hers.

"I repeat, your husband does not care for you," he went on, presently; "last night he never left Lady De Roubais's side, and made no efforts to disguise a devotion that was an insult to you. If I had found you happy, cared for, I would have gone away in silence—satisfied even, but it is not so. It does not require a lover's eye to see you miserable, for you carry it written all too plainly on your features. Alicia! come to me—let me love and cherish and care for you—let me show you what a husband should be!"

His voice was full of passionate, urgent entreaty, his eyes, tender, pleading, gazed into hers, and held them by the spell of their lovelight. He drew her to him, and for one moment she was held close against his beating heart.

We read in newspapers of battles fought under the leadership of daring generals—of the mighty onrush of contending legions, of the clash of steel and the rattle of bullets, of crushing defeat or splendid victory; but there is another sort of battle whose field is the human heart, and of it there is none to speak.

Yet, if we were gifted with omniscient power, if we could look into our fellow creatures' souls, and penetrate their secrets, maybe we might witness a warfare fiercer than any of those that history has written—we might see the triumph of conquest achieved, the humiliation of defeat, where the passions lie dead, side by side with their beloved idols.

But of these we know nothing, for the heart keeps its own secrets.

Who shall say what conflict raged in Alicia Carlyon's breast during that one brief moment while she lay in Stuart's arms?

On the one side she was offered happiness and love, on the other lay wretchedness and duty.

The fight was a hard one, but her good angel conquered, and she was true to herself.

She wrenched herself from his clasp, and stood a few paces away, both hands pressed against her beating heart.

"And you, who pretend to love me, would drag me down to such a depth!"

"No, no; you mistake me!" he exclaimed, eagerly. "If you will only consent to come with me I will take you to my mother, and leave you there until your husband has obtained a divorce; then we can be married. Believe me, darling, the step would be justified in the sight of Heaven and man."

She shook her head, smiling sadly.

"It is never justified even that good may come. No, Basil, if I were to do as you say your love for me would not be what it is at the present moment. There is a consciousness of duty that

outlives the passion of youth, and if I lost that I should be more miserable than I am now, for I still have my little child to think of and hope for. Do not say more to me!" she exclaimed, interrupting him, as he was about to speak, with a gesture of earnest entreaty, while her eyes grew wild. "Do not tempt me; you are stronger than I am, remember."

This piteous appeal to his manhood did more than anything else towards alluring him, and the words he was about uttering died on his lips.

"Very well," he said at last, his voice low and hoarse with pain, "I will obey you, and say goodbye!"

"Yes," she said, coming up to him, and putting her two slim, white hands on his breast, while her eyes gazed up into his with all the pathos of an eternal farewell. "It will be goodbye for ever, for we must never see each other more. You will go back to India knowing that we shall not meet again on this side the grave; and I—well, I shall try and believe there is another life after this, where wrongs are righted, and it is possible to be happy."

"Give me one kiss, then, Alicia; the last I shall ever have from you. It will be no wrong to your husband."

She obeyed, and for a moment their lips met; then he left her, and went out into the blinding rain, and on towards the valley where his home was, and where the mist was lying in heavy wreaths that shut out the distant prospect, as despair shut out all hope of happiness from his own life.

CHAPTER XIII.

THERE are some women whose presence in a sick chamber seems so perfectly natural that one never stays to question how they got there, or whether they know enough about nursing to render them of use. Such an one was Arline—flitting gaily about the room, moving the pillows without disturbing the sleeper, putting things straight in a swift, noiseless way, her soft footfall waking no more echo than the folds of her woollen draperies.

Dr. Fletcher, who was rather particular with his patient, had not made the slightest objection to her sometimes taking the place of the professional nurse, and allowing the latter to have her much-needed rest; but Lady De Roubaix was quite a different kind of person, and the physician stared as if he could hardly believe his eyes when, coming to pay a late afternoon visit, he found the Countess installed at the bedside—a singularly incongruous figure in that plain, though neatly-furnished apartment.

"You looked surprised, doctor," she said, with a gracious smile. "May I not attempt to make myself useful sometimes?"

"You may attempt it," replied the physician, with a dubious emphasis on the word that was hardly flattering.

"You are not afraid of your patient getting badly attended to, are you?"

He did not reply, but leaned over the sick woman, who was lying propped up by pillows, her eyes gazing vacantly out of the window, while the fingers of her left hand grasped tightly the little bag round her neck.

"What put it into your head to come here, if I may ask, Lady De Roubaix?" said the doctor, turning to the Countess, who coloured a little, either at the question or at the tone in which it was asked.

"I thought I might be of some use—one gets tired of doing nothing."

"Hum! It has taken you some time to find that out, has it not?" Dr. Fletcher's tongue was famed all over W—shire for its caustic severity, and Lady De Roubaix was not one of his favourites. However, it seemed to strike him that he had said a little too much; for he added, quickly, "I beg your pardon, but, as a rule, ladies fight shy of some sick rooms for fear of infection, or some rubbish of that sort. I am glad you prove yourself an exception."

"What do you think of Mrs. Grant to-day?"

"The same as I thought yesterday, and the

day before, and the day before that. She is progressing rapidly, so far as health is concerned, and will very soon be well enough to be up and about, but I'm afraid her memory is entirely gone."

"Do you mean she will be an idiot?"

"Hardly that. She may understand what is going on about her, but—for some time at all events—her recollection of the past must be a blank. She may recover it eventually, but I fear it will be a very slow process."

Having said which, he prepared to depart.

"Tell the nurse to keep on with the medicine at regular intervals, and see that nourishment is given pretty often," were his parting directions as he stood at the door.

"I will tell her, and—oh, Dr. Fletcher, I want you to send me a little laudanum some time this evening. I have had neuralgia, and that is the only thing that cures it at all."

The doctor promised not to forget, and then went away, Charlie standing thoughtfully by the bedside, and watching the patient, who was smiling innately as if that had settled on her right hand—her left never loosed its hold of the little bag.

If the Countess had known what was going on downstairs she might possibly have been less calm, for a question that nearly concerned her was being discussed between Lord Cliffe and his nephew. The former had sought Hubert in his study, and found him, for a wonder, doing nothing.

"How is it you are not out?" he asked, taking a seat opposite.

"I don't know—wasn't in the humour for it, I suppose. At any rate, I didn't think I cared so much for potting birds this morning as for staying at home."

"Bad sign, Hubert," observed Lord Cliffe, smiling; "looks as if you were in love."

The young man coloured violently, and avoided meeting the Viscount's eyes.

"Do you remember our conversation the day Charlie came?" went on Lord Cliffe, after a moment's pause.

"Perfectly," was the low-voiced rejoinder.

"I suppose you have not said anything to your cousin?"

"Do you mean proposed to her?"

"Well, hardly that. You might have given her reason to suppose you cared for her without going quite so far."

"I have not done so—I have not said a word to her that could possibly be construed into a declaration of love."

"Then," said Lord Cliffe, deliberately, "I think it is about time you had."

Hubert did not reply. He had taken up an ivory paper knife, and was balancing it with the utmost nicety on his finger.

"She has been here some time now," continued his uncle; "and so far as I can judge, you have not the smallest reason to fear a refusal, for Charlie has evinced a most decided preference for you."

"No more for me than for any other man who pays her compliments and attention," declared Hubert. "She is certainly insatiable in her demands on both."

Lord Cliffe looked slightly embarrassed.

"Of course she is a coquette—all women are, more or less, certainly all pretty ones."

Hubert thought of one who was not, but he refrained from saying anything.

"It is true that all the county looks upon you as virtually engaged to her, but it will be better to come to a full understanding at once, and then your marriage need not be long delayed."

"Uncle!" exclaimed Hubert, impulsively, "I wish you would not press me so much on this matter. The fact is, I am not in love with Charlie."

"Then you ought to be! She is young and beautiful. What more, in Heaven's name, do you want?"

"One doesn't give affection in return for a certain amount of youth or good looks. Love is not a marketable commodity; (to be bought and sold."

"Love is a delusion of the senses—a silly

infatuation—a theme for foolish poets to drivel about!" Lord Cliffe exclaimed, angrily. "The practical part of society can do well enough without it, and why you should think fit to make so much fuss over such stuff and nonsense totally passes my comprehension. However, I won't argue the point with you; it simply resolves itself into this. I have made up my mind that you shall marry Charlie, and I wish you to lose no time in proposing to her."

He got up, and walked excitedly to the window, Hubert meanwhile keeping his eyes fixed on the ground, and saying nothing.

After a few minutes' silence he proceeded,—

"Ask her to-day to marry you. Daintree, my lawyer, is coming over to-morrow night, and then we can give him instructions regarding the preparation of the settlements, and there will be no unnecessary delay."

"No!" said Hubert, letting the paper-knife fall heavily to the ground. "I shan't propose to her to-day; it's Friday, and therefore unlucky," he added, with a forced laugh. "I'll give myself twenty-four more hours' liberty, and then—"

"Then you will ask her? Very well, a day more or less does not make much difference, and I am quite content so that I know you will eventually marry her."

The Viscount went out, breathing an involuntary sigh of relief, for he felt that his object was virtually accomplished.

"It will set everything straight," he muttered to himself; "so that Charlie becomes mistress here, it matters little whether she reigns alone, or as queen consort."

It was not often Hubert Cliffe gave himself up to reflection, but this morning he seemed to be in a thoughtful mood, for he remained for quite half-an-hour where his uncle had left him, then suddenly got up, and looked very earnestly through the open window at a small, slight figure walking down the avenue.

His listless manner vanished as if by magic, and after waiting a few minutes until the person—whenever she might be—was hidden from view by the trees, he put on his hat, stepped out of the window, as being the easiest mode of exit, and sauntered slowly along until he was out of view of the house; then he quickened his pace, and came up with Arline—for it was she—just as she entered the wood on her way to the village.

"You are a quick walker, Miss Lester; I have had hard work to catch you up," he said, with his sunny smile, noticing what a violent start she gave as he heard his voice.

She paused a moment, then said—

"Am I wanted at the Court?"

"No; why?" he asked, surprised at the question.

"I know of no other motive that should have induced you to walk fast in order to speak to me," she rejoined, her voice very cold and steady.

When a young woman, who has all her life been accustomed to show her thoughts and feelings without restraint, suddenly finds herself called upon to act a part with a view to concealment, it is not unfrequently happens that she overdoes it. Arline fell into that mistake now.

Hubert looked at her in disconcerted silence; then put up his hand to conceal the half smile that came on his lips.

"Is it not possible that I might wish to give myself the pleasure of your society for a little while?"

Arline turned upon him quickly.

"It is possible, of course, but if you had the desire, it was one you had no business to attempt to gratify."

"Why not?"

The colour flamed brightly into her cheeks, and he could see by the rising and falling of the little gold brooch that pinned her collar how quickly her heart was beating; too quickly, indeed, to allow of speech.

She walked on, carrying her head well erect, while the red sunset that slanted through the trees touched the soft bloom of her cheeks, brought out the gold tints in her hair, lingered about her lovingly, as if it knew what

a fair thing she was, and was loth to part from her.

It was very lovely here in the wood, in the mellow silence of the autumn afternoon. True, many of the leaves had fallen, and strewed the ground, but enough still remained on the trees to prevent their looking wintry, and the russet and orange hues of the chestnuts were lighted up by the sunbeams into a wonderful brilliancy of ruddy colouring.

It was very still too—no sound to be heard save the soft cooing of a dove to its mate, and the murmur of falling water away in the distance.

"I want to see you for a specific object," said Hubert, presently. "For the last week or so it seems to me you have purposely avoided me, and when I have tried to speak to you, you have answered in monosyllables, and gone away as quickly as you could. Have I offended you?"

He waited a minute, and tried to look into her face, but she turned it aside, and he could only see the delicate, rounded outline of cheek and chin.

"Indeed," he added, softly, "I would not do or say anything to annoy you for all the world. Do you believe me?"

"No!"

"No!" he repeated, in astonishment. "What reason have you for doubting it?"

"I need not enter into my reasons," she said idly; "they cannot possibly be of interest to you."

"But they are!" he interrupted.

"Perhaps, in so far as they amuse you!" she added, with a bitter smile, whose meaning he did not understand.

"You puzzle me, Miss Lester. Do you know you are as unlike the girl who walked through this wood with me once before—you remember, when you sprained your ankle—as—as"—he paused for a smile, and then went on. "What has caused the change—has anyone been speaking to you against me? Ah! I see I have hit the mark at last. Do you think it is fair to condemn me unheard?"

Arline came to a standstill, and faced him, rather white, but with a steadfast look in her sweet, luminous eyes.

"Mr. Cliffe, I will speak to you plainly; it is perhaps best I should, and yet I can say nothing to you that you don't already know, for you must surely be aware that between you and me society has fixed a barrier, and if you attempt to overstep it you defy the power that raised it; in other words, I have been wrong to allow you to talk to me as you have done. It was kind of you to try and lessen my loneliness"—her voice faltered a little—"but all the same, it was liable to subject me to remark, and so I am resolved it shall be put an end to!"

"Someone has been talking to you!" he exclaimed, quickly. "I suspected it at first, but now I am sure of it. It was my cousin, perhaps."

"That is a matter of no importance beside the fact," she went on, without heeding him. "If anyone has spoken to me, it has been in kindness, and all I can ask of you is to please not to allow occasion for it in future."

"You mean that I am not to speak to you again?"

"No more than is necessary—no more than Lord Cliffe does."

"And you wish me to leave you now?"

"Yes."

"Do you mean what you say?"

"I do—entirely."

"Wait a moment!" he exclaimed, catching hold of her arm, and bringing her to a standstill. "If this is really the last time we meet in private I must not let you go away with a wrong impression concerning me. I have sought your society because I took a pleasure in it, and I thought—I thought the pleasure was mutual!"

He paused, and Arline stood perfectly still, her eyes bent on the ground.

"I fancied you liked talking to me better than to Mrs. Bolton, between whom and yourself there could be no bond of union, whereas you and I have many, very many, tastes in common. I

liked talking to you because you are pure and sweet, and true, and I always felt myself a better man in your presence; but if I had imagined that by doing so I was causing you annoyance I would have stopped away altogether. Another thing"—his voice dropped into a lower key, and he came a little nearer—"I fancied you liked me—was I wrong?"

Instead of replying, Arline attempted to shake herself free from his clasp.

"Loose me, Mr. Cliffe! Don't you see you are detaining me against my will?"

"I beg your pardon"—with deep humility, but still holding her arm—"I will let you go directly you have answered my question."

"It was a question you had no right to ask."

"Perhaps not, but having asked it, I must insist on a reply."

"Insist, Mr. Cliffe! You are making use of strange language."

"I am in a strange mood."

"That will hardly excuse your ungentlemanly conduct."

"It ought to, then, for the feelings that away me were held as a power long before society had decreed what 'gentlemanly conduct' meant."

His grasp held her like iron, and his eyes never wavered in their steadfast regard. Her anger had brought a crimson flush to her face, her scarlet lips quivered, her bosom was heaving—she looked most lovely in her excitement.

"Again I ask you to let me go!"

"And again I say I cannot until I have had an answer to my question."

"You shall have it then!" she exclaimed, passionately, turning her flashing eyes full upon him, and losing all self-control in her sore displeasure. "I do not like you—not at all, not one bit—I believe I hate you!"

She made a swift movement that would have set her free, but he was even quicker. Still holding her with his right hand he threw his left round her waist, and drew her to him, close, closer, until her face was against his shoulder. Then he bent down, and, in spite of her struggles, pressed his lips to hers.

There was a rustle in the bushes not far away—a hare, or rabbit, perhaps—but he heard it, and involuntarily loosed his hold, and Arline, like an arrow shot from a bow, ran swiftly along the narrow path, and never stopped until she got out of the wood, and close to the village which was her destination.

But before she reached it she sat down on the greensward that bordered the road, and indulged in the feminine solace of a good cry.

CHAPTER XIV.

Mrs. Bolton being, on the whole, a charitable and kindly woman, had undertaken on behalf of Lord Cliffe (whose purse was ever open to the needy) to care for the sick poor in the village, and, in her absence, this charge was delegated to Arline, who very readily fulfilled it.

It was to see a little sick child, supposed to be dying, that she had come out this afternoon, bringing with her some jellies and grapes, with a little wine, packed up in a basket she carried on her arm.

She did not go to the cottage at once, but stayed until she had gained the mastery over the indignation which she naturally felt at Hubert's outrageous and inexplicable behaviour.

What madness had possessed him to act in such a way was beyond her power to imagine; the mere thought of his behaviour brought hot, angry blushes to her cheeks, mingled with an untold shame that he should have dared to put upon her such an indignity.

She fully made up her mind now that she must leave the Court at once, and was already planning where she should go, for to remain under the same roof as Hubert was, of course, out of the question.

The little child she went to see was worse—would not last the night, so said her mother, who begged Arline to remain, for she was quite alone, and drew back with the feeling of

cold dread we all experience from meeting that terrible visitor, who was already so close to her threshold.

The little patient, too, whose senses were wandering, grasped Arline's hand and would not let it go—she had been dreaming of angels, and fancied one had come down to visit her—and it would have required a harder heart than our heroine's to tear herself away under such circumstances.

As it was, she stayed on and on, until night came, and then it seemed to her there was a slight change for the better in the condition of the little girl, who fell into a deep slumber, during which Arline took the opportunity of leaving the cottage.

As she got outside she heard the church clock striking ten; but Mrs. Bolton, guessing the true state of affairs, had had the forethought to send a servant to walk home with her, so the journey back to the Court would not be so lonely.

The way by the road was much the longer of the two, so Arline decided on the one by which she had come in the afternoon—that leading through the wood.

It was very dark under the shadow of the trees, for there was no moon, and all the light that filtered through the branches came from the stars shining between the rifts in the clouds.

No sound disturbed the quietude, except at intervals the shrill, harsh scream of an owl wandering about in search of food for its young ones' supper, or some other night-bird seeking for prey.

Before they had gone very far Arline regretted she had chosen this path; she was, as a rule, very brave, but the utter stillness, combined with the dense shadow, gave her a weird sense of loneliness, and unconsciously she quickened her footsteps, wishing herself safely back at the Court.

All of a sudden a dark figure sprang out from behind a tree, and caught hold of her arm, standing before her in the path so as to intercept her progress.

The shriek she would have uttered was paralysed by sheer fright, and she stood perfectly still, unable, indeed, to move, until a face peered down into hers, and a voice she knew, said with an accent of surprise—

"Why, it is Miss Lester!"

"Who did you think it was, pray?" she asked as Hubert Cliffe released her.

"Hush!" he said, in a low tone. "Don't speak above a whisper. There are poachers in the wood, and we stand a very good chance of trapping them at last, for they think all the keepers are at a servants' party at the Court, and are therefore off their guard. But what brings you here at this time of night?" he asked curiously.

Arline told him as briefly and succinctly as she could.

"It is a pity you chose this path, for you will not be able to go through the wood now," he observed. "A stray shot might strike you, for Heaven knows what may happen! Who have you with you?"

"One of the housemaids."

"That is no protection," dissatisfiedly, "and I cannot accompany you myself. You had better go back to the village, and get a conveyance from the inn; it is much too late for you to be out alone. I will come with you to the entrance of the wood."

But to this Arline objected, and in such terms that it was impossible for him to press his company upon her; she and the servant, therefore, turned back immediately, leaving him there, but before they reached the gate that gave access from the wood, their footsteps were arrested by the sharp report of a gun, and this was immediately followed by two others; then came the sound of voices raised in angry altercation, another report, a shout for help, a deep groan, then silence.

Arline and her companion stood still, and the latter, an ignorant country girl, frightened half out of her wits, took to her heels, and ran as fast as she could in the direction of the village, while our heroine hesitated, her heart almost



CLIFFE BENT DOWN, AND, IN SPITE OF HER STRUGGLES, PRESSED HIS LIPS TO HERS.

ceasing its beating in her terror and anxiety—terror, not for herself, but for Hubert.

Suppose the groan came from him—suppose he were shot, wounded, dying perhaps.

All thought of the insult he had put upon her vanished, only the remembrance that he might be in danger remained; and without an idea of self, of the risk she was incurring, or the danger that threatened her from stray shot, she made her way back to the place where she had left him, and then stood still, uncertain how to proceed.

Here it was darker than ever with the night shadows, through which the starshine could not penetrate, and only the mysterious murmur of the branches, as the wind swept through them, broke the silence that reigned. She peered round carefully in the hope of finding some one to guide her, but in vain.

"Mr. Cliffe!" she whispered, at last—then, raising her voice—"Mr. Cliffe!"

"Is that you, Arline?" said a faint voice, near.

"Yes; where are you?"

"Down here; underneath the tree to your right."

She groped her way, uncertain as to the direction, and he could trace her movements by the glimmer of her white linen cuffs.

"Kneel down!" he said, his voice only just audible, and she obeyed, and put out her right hand, round which his fingers weakly closed.

"Are you hurt, Mr. Cliffe?"

"Yes."

"Badly?"

"Very badly."

She drew a quick, sobbing breath, and her hands trembled; she could not speak.

"Are you sorry for me, Arline?"

No answer.

"This is no time for cherishing malice, little girl," went on Hubert, slowly and painfully. "At moments like these, injuries are forgiven and forgotten."

There was a pause, and then he continued,—

"Should you grieve at my death?"

"Don't speak like that, don't talk of death!"

"But suppose I must, Arline; suppose I stand quite close to the dark stream?"

A long shuddering sigh ran through her whole frame, and involuntarily her hand tightened its hold on his.

"I want to ask your pardon for what I did this afternoon," he added, still slowly, and at long intervals. "I was going to say something to you that might have excused it, but you ran away so quickly, I hadn't time. I couldn't help kissing you, Arline, though I know it was wrong. Do you forgive me?"

"Yes."

"Freely, fully, without reservation?"

"Freely, fully," she repeated, half mechanically, while her hot tears fell like rain over his hands.

"And those cruel words you uttered, that declaration of dislike. You know you said you hated me," he added, breaking in abruptly;

"did you mean it?"

She was silent.

"Tell me, Arline!" he went on, half raising himself, in his excitement, while his voice grew eager and impassioned. "Remember that this is perhaps the last time I shall ever speak to you; this time to-morrow there may be a gulf between us that cannot be bridged over! Did you mean what you said?"

"No!"

"Not at all; not one word!"

"Not at all; not one word!" she exclaimed, vehemently, all desire for concealing her weakness vanishing in this supreme moment.

"Then, darling, prove it by kissing me of your own free will."

She obeyed without hesitation; there was no time for hesitation now, when each moment might be bearing away his life; and there, in the dim wooded solitude, in the quiet hush of the night, all conventionalities were forgotten, and as lip pressed lip so heart spoke to heart.

For them Time existed no longer—the world was forgotten—the artificial barriers of society ignored. They only knew they were young, and tasting of life's purest elixir—the magic draught that brings oblivion to all save its own delight.

(To be continued.)

SOME of the Greek historians ascribe the invention of the trumpet to the Tyrrhenians, and others to the Egyptians. The trumpet was in use in the time of Homer. First torches, and then shells of fish, were the signals in primitive wars.

THE ivy affords a sheltered roosting-place to many poor birds during winter, saving numbers of them from want and death by its berries. In winter those shy and wary birds, the mistle-thrush and the wood-pigeon, compelled by hunger, approach our dwellings to feed upon the berries of the ivy; also, when spring approaches, the early building birds resort to the cover of its leaves to conceal their nests, finding the foliage necessary for this purpose scarce at this period. Thus the ivy affords shelter, food, and protection to the feathered race.

CHRISTMAS CHARITY.—Of all times in the year the Christmas-tide is that at which hearts and purse-strings should open widest in thoughts and deeds of charity. Those should give who never gave before, and those who are charitable always should at this season give the more. Some of our overflow of happiness should not fail to reach the poor and miserable, whom Father Christmas, an aristocratic fellow, is otherwise apt to slight. "To give is more blessed than to receive," especially when with so little so much happiness may be brought about. The most of those best able to give, who are apt to be personally unacquainted with the misery of our great city and the proper ways for its relief, will do well to distribute their bounty through the regularly organized channels which reach all classes.



ROSE FORRESTER LEANT HER HEAD UPON HER HAND, AND FELL INTO DEEP THOUGHT.

YOUNG AND SO FAIR.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

JUDITH'S EXPLOSION.

It is time to return to Coombe Lodge, where the invitation to Lord Wentworth's had just been received, and raised a storm in the breast of one, a flutter of excitement in the heart of another.

Judith, calm but defiant, looked daggers at her sister's pretty face, which was absolutely radiant with joy. Long ago she had been passed over for her cousin, who was now filling the place at The Chestnuts which she considered to be her own by right, and a second time she was put aside for Rose—a girl whom Lord Wentworth had scarcely ever seen.

Her only hope was that her father would refuse to let Rose go. He had always forbidden them to hold any communication with their cousins, and after that surely it must seem too ridiculous to let her stay under the same roof.

General Forrester took the letter upstairs to his wife, and the two girls were left alone at the breakfast-table. As soon as the door closed behind his revered back, Rose's delight broke bounds.

"Oh, Judith!" she exclaimed, "won't it be fun! I never was so delighted at anything in my life. Don't you envy me!"

"Certainly not!" with acid decision. "It remains to be seen whether you are going."

"I don't think papa meant to say 'no,' with happy confidence."

"I am sure he couldn't say 'yes.' What are you thinking of! If he wouldn't let Sibyl remain here because she was a disgrace to us, do you think he would let us go to the house where she is living! It would be quite absurd."

"She wasn't a disgrace to us!" said Rose, hotly; "and you've no right to say such nasty things of a girl who never did you any harm in your life."

"No harm!" and Judith's eyes flashed as the resentment which had been smouldering for years leapt into flame. "Do you call it no harm to set Dudley Wentworth against me—to wheedle herself into the place which I ought to have—to be the petted daughter of the house instead of me! Good heavens! when I think how that girl has ruined my life I feel as if I should never be satisfied till she was dead! Just because she looks like a pretty painted doll, and doesn't mind who she flirts with, she is to be put before me!" drawing herself up with the air of an empress. "I only wish I could give her the small-pox. Yes, you needn't look shocked; she should have it in the worst form, till every bit of her skin was crumpled out of shape, and the eyes she makes such use of sunk in their scarred lids!"

"Judith, are you mad!" cried her sister, breathlessly.

"No, not mad; only much wiser awake than any of you," she said, sullenly. "Go to The Chestnuts, and what will you find when you get there! That she has twisted Hugh round her finger like everyone else; and you'll have the pleasure of standing out in the cold. Mark my words. You are as blind as a bat, but you will see it plainly enough—when too late!"

Having said her say, she went out of the room and slammed the door, as if to give a fresh emphasis to her unpleasant remarks.

But no emphasis was needed. This unexpected outburst of rage and jealousy from the stately Judith had left Rose perfectly aghast.

Utterly startled out of her equanimity, she stood for some time as if rooted to the carpet, her eyes wide open in a sorrowful stare, and her lips apart; but when the man-servant came in to clear away the breakfast, she flew into the garden, conscious that her face would betray her emotion, and excite the gossip of the servants' hall.

Having reached a retired nook at the back of the shrubbery, where she and Phil had played their favourite games as children, she threw her-

self down on the grass and tried to collect her scattered wits.

"Judith must be mad!" An absolute shudder ran through her body as she recalled her sister's vindictive wish. "She couldn't have meant it—it was like the wild raving of a pagan squaw, and not in the least like a Forrester brought up in the fear of Heaven, and due regard to the precepts of religion. Was Sibyl to be hated simply because she was so pretty and charming that no one could resist her! Dudley was away, so that if he loved her to distraction no one would be a bit the wiser; and if Hugh were devoted to her"—here she could not help a sigh—"well, it was very natural. She was the dearest, most lovable creature on earth; and as to the stories against her there was not a bit of truth in them—of that she was quite sure."

She leant her head upon her hand and fell into deep thought, making a pretty picture as she sat at the foot of an ivied stump, her golden hair like a glory round an angel's face.

Rose Forrester had grown into a pretty girl, with a sweet, pale face, and large blue eyes. Their usual expression was strangely sad, as if they had caught the infection from Hugh's, but every now and then they would light up with sudden fear, an exquisite tint would come into her cheeks, and marble would wake into life. She looked so delicate, as if a puff of wind would blow her away, and an angry word might kill. She was the favourite of the household—her mother's especial pet, and her father's sunbeam.

General Forrester was proud of his eldest daughter, but his sternness never relaxed entirely unless his eye chanced to fall on his "little white Rose."

His voice calling her name roused her from her dreams, and scrambling to her feet, she hurried through the lights and shadows of the shrubbery, across the blazing lawn into the cool darkness of the house.

Her father beckoned her into the library, and she went in, her heart beating fast with hope and fear. One timid glance she raised to his

face, which was portentously grave, and then she sat down involuntarily on the nearest chair, for her knees showed every intention of giving way. Was she to go, or to be kept at home as Judith wanted, and shut out for ever from all the delights she had been picturing?

The General cleared his throat, as was his invariable habit when anyone was waiting in a fever of impatience to hear what he was going to say; and having done that, he opened his lips, whilst his little daughter absolutely shook with anxiety.

"Your mother agrees with me that it would be a pity"—Rose absolutely gasped as he paused—"a pity to refuse you a glimpse into better society than we can find down here, so that if you feel there would be no awkwardness—ahem—in meeting your cousin, I will write to Lord Wentworth and say—"

"Oh, papa, how delightful!" and, bounding from her chair, she clasped her arms round his neck and kissed his worn cheek again and again.

"But I haven't finished," with an indulgent smile, such as no one but Rose ever brought to his face. "I may write and decline!"

"No—no, that wouldn't be sense with what went before."

"So you are pleased to go away from us?" with an attempt at reproach.

"But I shall have such a lot to tell you when I come back. I wonder if Phil can get leave. Won't it be jolly if he does?"

"I shall be glad because there will be somebody to take care of you. Remember, Rose," resuming his pompous manner, "I will have no wild pranks—no flirting nonsense, or disreputable escapades in the moonlight. You will be under Lord Wentworth's roof, and he, I am happy to say, would never tolerate anything of the kind."

"No more would I," drawing up her white throat with offended dignity. "If you can't trust me, perhaps I had better not go."

"But I can. Only I wish you to guard against an evil influence," his lips going into a hard, straight line as he thought of his niece.

"Hugh will be the only man there, except Phil, and it is too late to guard against him; we are such very old friends."

"It was not Hugh I meant. You know that well enough. Now run away to your mother. I believe she fancies a new dress will be necessary, but I hope you will be able to do without it. That woman's last bill stumped me, I can tell you."

Rose hurried off nothing loth, and had an animated discussion over the exigencies of her toilette in the privacy of her mother's room.

She was so intensely happy that every now and then she burst into song, and Mrs. Forrester watched her with a tender smile, thankful that her husband had given the required permission, so that she had not to look on a tear-stained face instead.

It was decided that nothing but a new dress would do for the Countess's dance, and a letter was written at once to the dressmaker, in spite of that last long bill. Knowing that in a fine dress she could scarcely fail to look well, the girl's spirits rose to an alarming pitch; but one glance at Judith's set face brought them down with a run, and left a feeling of guilt in their place. Was it right for her to rejoice over anything that, for some occult reason, caused her sister such extraordinary pain? But then Judith had no right to be angry, for the invitation was given to celebrate Hugh's coming of age, and it would have been absurd for her to go to The Chestnuts as MacDonald's special friend. Lord Wentworth of course knew that the two younger ones were nearer his age, and therefore more likely to get on with him the best. When Dudley came home it would be natural for Judith to be invited, and Rose would stay behind quite contented, without wishing to give her an attack of small-pox out of revenge!

Phil wrote to say that he had been able to get leave, and would meet Rose on the afternoon of the fifteenth at Victoria.

Priscilla conducted her young mistress up to town, and delivered her safely into her brother's hands, wishing at the bottom of her heart that she might have accompanied her to The Chest-

nuts, in order that she might bring some pot scrap of gossip home about that "artful young hussy." No doubt she was up to her mischief just the same as ever, and if she could have caught her tripping it would have been joyful news for Miss Judith.

Phil had grown into a gentlemanly-looking young man, rather lanky in figure, and narrow across the chest. He was neither handsome nor plain, but had a weak, fair face, which would have been much better-looking if it could have acquired an expression of manly resolution. As the two travelled down to Thornfield he was wondering what Sibel would think of him, and how she would greet him.

Had she forgotten that unucky valentine, or would she owe him a grudge for it till the last day of her life? He pulled his tiny moustaches nervously as they came near the station, and subsided into profound silence. For two years he had treasured her image as the perfection of girlish beauty; but he was a boy then—and boys were always in love with the first girl they came across. Now he had grown critical, and was not disposed to fall down and worship unless the idol were really something superlative; but if he failed to worship, on the other hand he hated to be snubbed, and there seemed to be some chance of that most unpleasant alternative.

Hang it all! He was a man now, and could hold his own with everyone except the governor at home.

CHAPTER XXXV.

HUGH'S BIRTHDAY PRESENT.

Two figures were standing on the platform—a young lady dressed quietly, but tastefully, in the latest fashion, with a large sunshade, from under which peeped the most bewitching face in the world, and a young man, tall and distinguished looking, in spite of the ordinary snit of dittos in which he was arrayed. Lieutenant Philip Forrester, of the Royal Derbyshire Foot, forgot all about his qualms in honest admiration of his cousin's beauty. He opened the door and jumped out as Hugh was in the act of raising his hat to Rose, and forgot to help his sister out in his eagerness to shake hands with Sibel.

"How d'ye do. Ages since we met!"

"Oh, Phil, I shouldn't have known you," as she stepped back in order to have a good look at him. "To think of you as a real officer! I shall have to begin to treat you with respect. But where's Rose? You dear little thing! I'm so delighted to see you."

In spite of porters and sundry nondescripts who had just arrived, the warmest of hugs ensued, and the tears were in two pairs of eyes when they walked side by side to the carriage. "The brougham for you and me, the cart for the boys. Get in, I shan't feel as if you were really come till I've landed you at The Chestnuts."

"Oh, Sibel! I'm so glad," and a little hand stole into hers, as they drove rapidly through the leafy lanes towards their destination.

They had so much to tell each other that it seemed as if a whole week would scarcely be long enough to bring them to the end of their conversation; but a pause was enforced by their arrival at The Chestnuts, and the necessity of responding to Lord Wentworth's courtly welcomes.

After five o'clock tea the four young people strolled about the garden, Phil on in front with Sibel, Hugh lazily loitering behind with Rose, whilst he pondered over a certain point which vexed him.

"And you like your life now, Phil?" asked Sibel, with cousinly interest, as she stole a glance sideways into his face, and wondered why his moustaches would not grow like MacDonald's.

"Yes, tol-lol, but the service, you know, isn't what it used to be."

"No. I heard the other day that in so many ways it was much improved."

"Is it though? I should like to know how. Formerly you might be pretty sure of having

gentlemen for your comrades; now any old cat get in, if he happens to have enough brains."

"Is that the case in your regiment? I mean are there many cats?"

"Not in ours. Jove, we should soon turn them out."

"Then what were you grumbling at?"

"I grumbling! Nothing was further from my thoughts!"

"Oh! I thought you were," meekly.

"No, I was only saying what everyone else says, so it must be true."

"I don't know. Get a big man to tell a falsehood, and crowds are sure to believe it."

"Ah! but humbug hasn't a chance in these days. It's run down like a fox."

"Then what is to become of you?" looking up at him with laughing eyes. "I am afraid your trade must have failed."

He laughed.

"It did when you dissolved the partnership."

"I never was in it!" with just indignation, for by nature she was as open as the day.

"Yes, you were; you were the life and soul of the concern. It was for you I was always humbugging and cheating the others. I never should have thought of it if it hadn't been for you."

"Phil, I am ashamed of you!"

"Pray be as angry as you like. I haven't forgotten how we used to kiss and make friends, with imperturbable serenity."

"We shan't do it now," growing very red.

"Why not? Is there any reason against it?"

"Plenty!" turning her back and pulling a caterpillar off a rose.

"Not so many as there are in favour—brand new ones, worthy of the most serious consideration."

"Pray let us be serious," she said, demurely.

"I am as grave as the governor. Couldn't say more. First, you are more charming than ever; secondly, I am more determined; thirdly, I should enjoy it so much more than when I was a cub."

"What would you enjoy," said Hugh's voice from the background.

"A cousinly privilege, which has nothing to do with you!" said Phil, with a laugh. "You attend to your own business, and we'll mind ours!"

"Perhaps yours is mine," muttered Hugh, with a shade on his face.

"Shan't we take them into the kitchen-garden and give them some strawberries?" said Sibel, hastily.

"By all means!"

The girls stood under the shade of an apple tree whilst "the boys" picked. There was plenty of fruit, and after a little while they all adjourned to a small arbour in the corner of the garden, to eat at their leisure. Hugh picked out one strawberry as big as an egg, and handed it to Sibel. She admired it much, and passed it on to Rose, who ate it, and said it was very delicious, but Hugh turned away his head, and scarcely listened to her praises.

Shortly afterwards Sibel took Rose to her room, in order to prepare for dinner, and then ran down to the conservatory to find a flower for her hair. She had not been there long when Hugh came in, with his hands in his pockets and an air of great pre-occupation.

"Awful bore having to go off to-morrow! Shouldn't mind it if some of you were coming too."

"I thought Phil was going!"

"So he is!" in a way that showed his presence was not all that could be desired.

"You see, it would be so tiring for Rose, doubtfully, as she cut a spray of maidenhair."

"For Rose, yes, but I thought—I hoped you wouldn't mind."

"But I couldn't go!" in intense surprise. "Fancy my walking off into another country with two young men!"

"Better than with one. Seriously, do you think it would matter? I chaperoned you once before to Woolwich."

"Yes, but I should have to make a

public spectacle of myself before a crowd of your tenants. Why, they would naturally jump to the conclusion that I was the future Mrs. Macdonald. And that would never do!" with a laughing shake of her head.

He looked as grave as a judge.

"Why not?"

"Don't be ridiculous!"—then anxious to change the subject—"I am in great tribulation. Do you know to-morrow will come, and I don't believe I shall have a present to give you! Don't imagine that I forgot it, but the wretched people haven't sent it."

"All the better, I can choose my own."

"No you can't, you impertinent boy, for it was ordered long ago, and I can't afford two."

"But you wouldn't leave me without one!"

"What am I to do if I have nothing to give?" lifting her lashes in great perplexity.

"Give me something small that won't cost anything. Let me choose it myself."

"But I've nothing," lost in deep thought. "A volume of the Idylls, but it's grown quite shabby. A travelling inkstand—but you never write—a pencil-case, but the stone at the end of it has fallen out."

"Bring these treasures here to-morrow morning at nine o'clock."

"But I tell you none of them will do."

"Never mind, will you give me whatever I choose?"

"Of course I will, but I wanted it to be splendid."

He smiled.

"I shall value it coming from you; but mind"—very earnestly—"come quite alone. And don't let Phil come after you. Now, do you know, you will be frightfully late for dinner!" throwing open the door into the drawing-room, to expedite her escape, with a mischievous smile.

"No, whose fault is that!" and she ran away with the speed of a frightened rabbit.

The next morning, directly she was awake, the thought of Hugh's present was uppermost in her mind. She had intended to give him something especially unique, which he might value in after years as a gift from his old friend; and now it was a real mortification to find that she had nothing to offer him that was worthy of the occasion. Just as the clock struck nine she appeared at the door of the conservatory, with a variety of articles in her hands. Hugh was there before her, and gave her hand the warmest of shakes in answer to her good wishes. Then the treasures were spread out on the seat, and they both stood silently regarding them.

"Take them up and look at them. How can you choose till you know what they are like?"

"I have chosen," he said, quietly, as he put his arm round her waist, and drew her gently to him. "You can't refuse it me. You said I might have what I liked."

"But, Hugh!" her face covered with blushes, as she drew it shyly away.

"Sibel, think, is it too much to ask?" his dark eyes looking wistfully into hers. "We have been like brother and sister for all these years. You would give it to Phil, just because he is your cousin—can you refuse it to me? Tell me, which do you like best?"

"You, a thousand times!"

Then very gently, but with inward passionate eagerness, he touched her lips with his, and for one long minute he held her to his heart, her bright head resting on his shoulder. Oh! to hold her so for ever, and protect her against all the ills and the sorrows of the world, to have the right to watch over her and to keep everyone else away! He was lost in a dream which seemed almost too sweet for earth, when Phil's voice was heard in the hall, fretfully inquiring "where they had all got to?"

Sibel started.

"I must go."

"You have made this day the happiest of my life," his eyes shining with joy.

A pang shot through her heart, as she saw his radiant face transfigured with love and delight.

"What have I done?" she faltered.

"Nothing wrong, dearest, so don't repent; one happy day in a man's life is not too much

for him," speaking in a low hurried voice, still unsteady from excess of feeling.

Her fears increased, but she tried to comfort herself with a remembrance of his youth.

"Remember," she said suddenly, "you are only a boy!"

"Not to-day," with a smile. "I am a man, something more than a plaything, and capable of being anything that you want."

"I want nothing but a brother," gathering up her parcels in some confusion.

"Then a brother I'll be for the present. Shall I carry those for you?"

"For the present? Why do you say only for the present?" as she let the book fall, and he stooped to pick it up.

As he raised his head their eyes met; and there was such a look in his that her own sank, and her lashes seemed glued to her cheeks.

"Hugh! Hugh! what on earth are you after!" cried Phil, wrathfully, as he came striding through the drawing-room, having at last discovered his whereabouts. "Here have Rose and I been waiting for you for the last half-hour, and the cart will be round in five minutes."

"Plenty of time," said Hugh, carelessly. "You must allow a fellow one moment to receive his birthday presents."

"Good-morning, how blooming you look!" to Sibel, as he shook hands and attempted to use his cousinly privilege, but Hugh's eye was upon him, and Sibel threw back her head so decidedly that he laughed, and wanted the courage to go on.

In the dining-room Rose was waiting with her present in her hand. She came forward, her pretty face suffused with blushes.

"It's only a little trifle, Hugh, from Phil and me, and I wish you many happy returns of the day."

"How awfully kind of you. I shall value it immensely!" and he shook hands heartily with them both.

Then he undid the silver paper, and discovered a cigar-case of morocco leather, embroidered in forget-me-nots.

"Did you work it for me?" looking at Rose. "Now, really, that was too good of you. I shall be smoking from morning till night, and every time I light a cigar I shall think of you and Phil."

"Well, Sibel, what did you give him?" asked Phil, as he resumed his seat at the breakfast-table.

She bent her head over the silver coffee-pot, whilst Hugh called out, as he stretched across the table for some stewed mushrooms,—

"Something too exquisite."

"Have you got it here? Show it us."

"Of course I've got it. Help yourself to some kidneys. Where's the pepper? Here's the salt. One word to my uncle, and then I'm off."

"He has eaten nothing," said Rose, regretfully, as he rushed out of the room.

"The little boy's excited," said Phil, patronisingly; "but, never mind, I've eaten enough for two."

CHAPTER XXXVI.

HIS DREAM WAS OVER!

"You didn't expect to see me!" said Lord Windsor, as he came forward to greet the party from The Chestnuts, his collar as high as ever, and his diamond solitaire shining like a star.

He shook hands with Lord Wentworth, nodded to Hugh, bowed low as his mother introduced him to the Forresters, but his speech was addressed to Sibel, and his thoughts were with her all the while.

"Jove, I thought I was never going to see you again. Only came back last night, and what do you think brought me!"

"Possibly the train," with a slight smile, as she looked round at the blue velvet hangings and the shining mirrors, and remembered her own feelings at her first visit to the Court rather more than two years ago.

"Yes, but what made me get into the train?"

"The wish not to be left on the platform,"

demurely looking down at the roses which Hugh had given her.

"But I needn't have come to the platform."

"No, I suppose not. Why did you?"

"You might have asked that before."

"You might have told me without waiting to be asked."

"I wanted you to guess."

"But how could I, knowing nothing of your movements or your motives?"

"You didn't know where I was, but you did know why I wasn't here. My mother says I've deserted her shamefully, so I told her—"

"Windsor, you really must go and speak to the Duchess," and Lady Windsor smiled at Sibel, as if to show that she was glad to see her son talking to her, although she was obliged to call him away. "Is that pretty little girl, just like a snowdrop, your cousin?"

"Yes, it is her first ball, and I am so anxious for her to enjoy it."

"I think she will if Mr. Macdonald—Hugh, I must call him Hugh—is as anxious as yourself. What a pretty pair they make!" looking across the room to where Rose was sitting by Lord Wentworth's side, whilst Macdonald was leaning over the back of the sofa, "he with his dark Spanish face, and she a dear little blonde. I believe I am developing into a match-maker, but I can't help it when Hugh is concerned. This is his party to-night. Whom shall he open it with? Shall it be Lady Constance? I tell Windsor he is nobody."

"And I am so glad," said her son, at her elbow. "Macdonald shall dance with all the heavy swells, and I with the ones I like best. Will you come?" offering his arm to Sibel as if that were the natural consequence of his last speech.

She laughed and shook her head, and at the same time Hugh came hastily across the room, fearing that she had forgotten her promise.

"I hope you have not forgotten," he said, with a low bow. "This is ours."

"Impossible!" exclaimed Lord Windsor, angrily. "I have come all the way from London to dance it."

"That's not much," said Hugh, with a smile, "I've come of age on purpose for it."

"You! What is it to you?"

"More than anything else," and he led his prize off in triumph.

"Confound the boy! What the deuce does he mean by it! There can't be anything in it. Well, at any rate, I'll show her that I'm not breaking my heart," and the next moment he astonished the modest Rose by asking if he might have the honour.

Lord Wentworth she had always regarded with the utmost awe; but now she was actually dancing with an earl, and did not find him in the least degree awe-striking. He made her laugh, with his odd way of talking, and she found herself chatting with him as merrily as if her partner had been Hugh.

"Couldn't still going to marry Lushington?" he asked, abruptly, as they stopped to take breath.

"Yes; I think so," with a slight sigh, for she had never considered him worthy of her.

"Not certain, eh?"

"She is engaged, and has been for ever so long."

"What made her do it?" lowering his voice confidentially, and longing to stoop, but the edge of his collar nearly cut off his ear.

Rose blushed crimson, as she remembered every disagreeable reason that had driven her cousin to such a desperate measure. Could she tell them to this extraordinary young man, and if not, what was she to say?

"He is very handsome," she said, hesitatingly.

"Old proverb, you know, 'Handsome is as handsome does.' If you looked at him in that light he might be downright plain."

"Yes!" breathlessly. "Is he very wicked?"

A smile flitted across the Earl's face.

"Don't do to take a man's character away behind his back! Have another turn!"

Poor little Rose glided round the room in a perturbed state of mind, although she looked as sweet and serene as a primrose before it is

face, which was portentously grave, and then she sat down involuntarily on the nearest chair, for her knees showed every intention of giving way. Was she to go, or to be kept at home as Judith wanted, and shut out for ever from all the delights she had been picturing?

The General cleared his throat, as was his invariable habit when anyone was waiting in a fever of impatience to hear what he was going to say; and having done that, he opened his lips, whilst his little daughter absolutely shook with anxiety.

"Your mother agrees with me that it would be a pity"—Rose absolutely gasped as he paused—"a pity to refuse you a glimpse into better society than we can find down here, so that if you feel there would be no awkwardness—ahem—in meeting your cousin, I will write to Lord Wentworth and say—"

"Oh, papa, how delightful!" and, bounding from her chair, she clasped her arms round his neck and kissed his worn cheek again and again.

"But I haven't finished," with an indulgent smile, such as no one but Rose ever brought to his face. "I may write and decline!"

"No—no, that wouldn't be sense with what went before."

"So you are pleased to go away from us?" with an attempt at reproach.

"But I shall have such a lot to tell you when I come back. I wonder if Phil can get leave. Won't it be jolly if he does?"

"I shall be glad because there will be somebody to take care of you. Remember, Rose," resuming his pompous manner, "I will have no wild pranks—no flirting nonsense, or disreputable escapades in the moonlight. You will be under Lord Wentworth's roof, and he, I am happy to say, would never tolerate anything of the kind."

"No more would I," drawing up her white throat with offended dignity. "If you can't trust me, perhaps I had better not go."

"But I can. Only I wish you to guard against an evil influence," his lips going into a hard, straight line as he thought of his niece.

"Hugh will be the only man there, except Phil, and it is too late to guard against him; we are such very old friends."

"It was not Hugh I meant. You know that well enough. Now run away to your mother. I believe she lances a new dress will be necessary, but I hope you will be able to do without it. That woman's hat bill stumped me, I can tell you."

Rose hurried off nothing loth, and had an animated discussion over the exigencies of her toilette in the privacy of her mother's room.

She was so intensely happy that every now and then she burst into song, and Mrs. Forrester watched her with a tender smile, thankful that her husband had given the required permission, so that she had not to look on a tear-stained face instead.

It was decided that nothing but a new dress would do for the Countess's dance, and a letter was written at once to the dressmaker, in spite of that late long bill. Knowing that in a fine dress she could scarcely fail to look well, the girl's spirits rose to an alarming pitch; but one glance at Judith's set face brought them down with a run, and left a feeling of guilt in their place. Was it right for her to rejoice over anything that, for some occult reason, caused her sister such extraordinary pain? But then Judith had no right to be angry, for the invitation was given to celebrate Hugh's coming of age, and it would have been absurd for her to go to The Chestnuts as MacDonald's special friend. Lord Wentworth of course knew that the two younger ones were nearer his age, and therefore more likely to get on with him the best. When Dudley came home it would be natural for Judith to be invited, and Rose would stay behind quite contented, without wishing to give her an attack of small-pox out of revenge!

Phil wrote to say that he had been able to get leave, and would meet Rose on the afternoon of the fifteenth at Victoria.

Priscilla conducted her young mistress up to town, and delivered her safely into her brother's hands, wishing at the bottom of her heart that she might have accompanied her to The Chest-

nuts, in order that she might bring some pot-scrap of gossip home about that "arful young hussy." No doubt she was up to her mischief just the same as ever, and if she could have caught her tripping it would have been joyful news for Miss Judith.

Phil had grown into a gentlemanly-looking young man, rather lanky in figure, and narrow across the chest. He was neither handsome nor plain, but had a weak, fair face, which would have been much better-looking if it could have acquired an expression of manly resolution. As the two travelled down to Thornfield he was wondering what Sibel would think of him, and how she would greet him.

Had she forgotten that unlicky valentine, or would she owe him a grudge for it till the last day of her life? He pulled his tiny moustaches nervously as they came near the station, and subsided into profound allience. For two years he had treasured her image as the perfection of girlish beauty; but he was a boy then—and boys were always in love with the first girl they came across. Now he had grown critical, and was not disposed to fall down and worship unless the idol were really something superlative; but if he failed to worship, on the other hand he hated to be snubbed, and there seemed to be some chance of that most unpleasant alternative.

Hang it all! He was a man now, and could hold his own with everyone except the governor at home.

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"I want nothing but a brother," gathering up her parcels in some confusion.

"Then a brother I'll be for the present. Shall I carry those for you?"

"For the present? Why do you say only for the present?" as she let the book fall, and he stooped to pick it up.

As he raised his head their eyes met; and there was such a look in his that her own sank, and her lashes seemed glued to her cheeks.

"Hugh! Hugh! what on earth are you after!" cried Phil, wrathfully, as he came striding through the drawing-room, having at last discovered his whereabouts. "Here have Rose and I been waiting for you for the last half-hour, and the cart will be round in five minutes."

"Plenty of time," said Hugh, carelessly. "You must allow a fellow one moment to receive his birthday presents."

"Good-morning, how blooming you look!" to Sibel, as he shook hands and attempted to use his consoling privilege, but Hugh's eye was upon him, and Sibel threw back her head so decidedly that he laughed, and wanted the courage to go on.

In the dining-room Rose was waiting with her present in her hand. She came forward, her pretty face suffused with blushes.

"It's only a little trifle, Hugh, from Phil and me, and I wish you many happy returns of the day."

"How awfully kind of you. I shall value it immensely!" and he shook hands heartily with them both.

Then he undid the silver paper, and discovered a cigar-case of morocco leather, embroidered in forget-me-nots.

"Did you work it for me?" looking at Rose. "Now, really, that was too good of you. I shall be smoking from morning till night, and every time I light a cigar I shall think of you and Phil."

"Well, Sibel, what did you give him?" asked Phil, as he resumed his seat at the breakfast-table.

She bent her head over the silver coffee-pot, whilst Hugh called out, as he stretched across the table for some stewed mushrooms,—

"Something too exquisite."

"Have you got it here? Show it us."

"Of course I've got it. Help yourself to some kidneys. Where's the pepper? Here's the cart. One word to my uncle, and then I'm off."

"He has eaten nothing," said Rose, regretfully, as he rushed out of the room.

"The little boy's excited," said Phil, patronisingly; "but, never mind, I've eaten enough for two."

CHAPTER XXXVI.

HIS DREAM WAS OVER!

"You didn't expect to see me!" said Lord Windsor, as he came forward to greet the party from The Chestnuts, his collar as high as ever, and his diamond solitaire shining like a star.

He shook hands with Lord Wentworth, nodded to Hugh, bowed low as his mother introduced him to the Forresters, but his speech was addressed to Sibel, and his thoughts were with her all the while.

"Jove, I thought I was never going to see you again. Only came back last night, and what do you think brought me?"

"Possibly the train," with a slight smile, as she looked round at the blue velvet hangings and the shining mirrors, and remembered her own feelings at her first visit to the Court rather more than two years ago.

"Yes, but what made me get into the train?"

"The wish not to be left on the platform,"

demurely looking down at the roses which Hugh had given her.

"But I needn't have come to the platform."

"No, I suppose not. Why did you?"

"You might have asked that before."

"You might have told me without waiting to be asked."

"I wanted you to guess."

"But how could I, knowing nothing of your movements or your motives?"

"You didn't know where I was, but you did know why I wasn't here. My mother says I've deserted her shamefully, so I told her—"

"Windsor, you really must go and speak to the Duchess," and Lady Windsor smiled at Sibel, as if to show that she was glad to see her son talking to her, although she was obliged to call him away. "Is that pretty little girl, just like a snowdrop, your cousin?"

"Yes, it is her first ball, and I am so anxious for her to enjoy it."

"I think she will if Mr. Macdonald—Hugh, I must call him Hugh—is as anxious as yourself. What a pretty pair they make!" looking across the room to where Rose was sitting by Lord Wentworth's side, whilst Macdonald was leaning over the back of the sofa, "he with his dark Spanish face, and she a dear little blonde. I believe I am developing into a match-maker, but I can't help it when Hugh is concerned. This is his party to-night. Whom shall he open it with? Shall it be Lady Constance? I tell Windsor he is nobody."

"And I am so glad," said her son, at her elbow. "Macdonald shall dance with all the heavy swells, and I with the ones I like best. Will you come?" offering his arm to Sibel as if that were the natural consequence of his last speech.

She laughed and shook her head, and at the same time Hugh came hastily across the room, fearing that she had forgotten her promise.

"I hope you have not forgotten," he said, with a low bow. "This is ours."

"Impossible!" exclaimed Lord Windsor, angrily. "I have come all the way from London to dance it."

"That's not much," said Hugh, with a smile, "I've come of age on purpose for it."

"You! What is it to you?"

"More than anything else," and he led his prize off in triumph.

"Confound the boy! What the deuce does he mean by it? There can't be anything in it. Well, at any rate, I'll show her that I'm not breaking my heart," and the next moment he astonished the modest Rose by asking if he might have the honour.

Lord Wentworth she had always regarded with the utmost awe; but now she was actually dancing with an earl, and did not find him in the least degree awe-striking. He made her laugh, with his odd way of talking, and she found herself chatting with him as merrily as if her partner had been Hugh.

"Cousin still going to marry Lushington?" he asked, abruptly, as they stopped to take breath.

"Yes; I think so," with a slight sigh, for she had never considered him worthy of her.

"Not certain, eh?"

"She is engaged, and has been for ever so long."

"What made her do it?" lowering his voice confidentially, and longing to stoop, but the edge of his collar nearly cut off his ear.

Rose blushed crimson, as she remembered every disagreeable reason that had driven her cousin to such a desperate measure. Could she tell them to this extraordinary young man, and if not, what was she to say?

"He is very handsome," she said, hesitatingly.

"Old proverb, you know, 'Handsome is as handsome does.' If you looked at him in that light he might be downright plain."

"Yes!" breathlessly. "Is he very wicked?"

A smile flitted across the Earl's face.

"Don't do to take a man's character away behind his back! Have another turn?"

Poor little Rose glided round the room in a perturbed state of mind, although she looked as sweet and serene as a primrose before it is

gathered. The careless words uttered by Lord Windsor had conjured up a vision of wickedness before her mind's eye, and she felt as if she were the depository of a terrible secret which she must divulge to somebody, or else let it be a nightmare to her for the rest of her life.

Should she tell it to Hugh? Oh! why did he dance with Sibbel as if he had not a thought beyond! She was somebody else's property, though no one would guess it to see those two together—the air of proud appropriation in the one, the evident fond affection in the other.

She had treasured up the book of verses which he had given her on her tenth birthday; but he would never remember that he had written H. M. in a boyish scrawl under the sonnet to a rose, or know how often she had read it, till the quaint, old words were engraved on her heart.

The waltz ended, and she was claimed by one partner after another, but Hugh seemed to be always in close attendance on Sibbel, and to have clean forgotten all about his little old, old friend.

"I don't believe you have danced with Rose yet!" she said, in surprise, towards the middle of the evening.

"Not yet, there is no hurry," as his arm stole round her waist for another turn.

"Oh, no hurry! and when the end of the evening comes and she hasn't a dance to give, you will be so savage."

"You said I should be in love with her half an hour after she came to the house. Do you see much sign of it?"

"Oh, that is all perversity! You always have been her special friend, and of course you always will."

"Not always, only when I was a boy. How hot the room is! Shall we go out into the garden?"

Without waiting for an answer, although he was generally so anxious to ascertain her wishes before expressing his own, he led her through the open window, across the terrace, down a few steps on to the seclusion of a lower path, where there were no prying eyes to see, no inquisitive ears to listen. There was a low seat under an arch of roses at the end, and there he halted, took out his pocket handkerchief to wipe away the dew, and dropped down beside her, as soon as she had thanked him and taken her seat.

It was a glorious night, with not the slightest breeze to move the branches, and the stars looked down from Heaven in the breathless hush, whilst the insect world was sleeping, and all nature that did not beat with a human pulse seemed glad to rest.

Hugh's heart was throbbing with passionate hope, but he was half-afraid of speaking the words which rushed to his lips. Long ago he had thought that Dudley Wentworth was his rival, but the years had passed without a sign, and he had taught himself to believe that he had been mistaken from the first.

As to Lushington a hint dropped by Phil had opened his eyes, and his suspicions were not far from the truth. She had been drawn into the engagement, thanks to the awkward circumstances in which she had found herself placed, and her heart had never been given with her promised hand. If her heart were still free, he swore that he would win it, and Major Lushington, who had sneaked off to Canada, like a dog with his tail behind his legs, might find some North American belle for his wife. He knew that he ought to wait, but his heart was on fire, and his youth was strong within him.

He leant his arm on the back of the seat, and looked down at her with longing eyes; stooping so low that his breath fanned the soft, brown curls, which added such a pretty grace to her forehead.

They were alone, with the scent of the flowers riding like a breath of incense all round them, and the dusky wings of night to shadow.

"Some day I shall have to leave The Chestnuts, and go to a home of my own. It is so lonely. I thought of it to-day when all the speeches were done, and the people had gone. There was not a soul in the house, except a handful of servants, and they stared at me as if

I were a stranger. I shall never go there—never have the courage to face them again, unless—unless— Could you promise to come with me when I go!" in the softest, tenderest whisper.

"If Lord Wentworth would bring me." "Lord Wentworth! Do you think I could ever leave him as long as he was alive! I was talking of afterwards"—his voice sinking—"afterwards, when you and I are left. You'll be all she would to me, and I should care for nothing else."

"Oh, Hugh!" the tears starting to her eyes, for it was such pain to grieve him, "how can you ask! You forget, I shan't be there."

"If you are thinking of Lushington, that's nothing. I swear you shall never marry him! But, is there any other reason? I had waited and watched, till I almost thought it was very presumptuous, but you were so kind."

There was no answer, but the brown head sank lower, and the quivering face was covered with her hands.

A terrible fear crept through his heart, and his face turned ashy pale.

"Sibbel, for Heaven's sake, tell me!" Again no answer, but the white shoulders shook with a convulsive sob. "What are you crying for! Not for me, surely!" in great dismay, dropping down on his knees before her, and gently drawing away her hands, and holding them fast.

"Don't, my darling!" as a large tear fell on his hand, "I can bear it—a man can bear anything," gulping down the lump which rose in his own throat. "I ought to have known I wasn't half worthy of you!"

"Oh! if you could only have been my brother!"

"I will be; and, from this day forth, I devote myself to you!" looking up into her pitiful face, like a young knight of old, taking his vows. "When you want me I shall be there, and when you don't want me—" his voice broke, but he went on bravely to the end. "You—you needn't trouble about me at all."

Then his head sank, and his fevered lips rested on her hands. His dream was over.

(To be continued.)

A FATAL JEST.

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(Continued from page 224.)

Her wealth gave her but little pleasure; her thoughts were always far away with Elsie Eldon. Despite her pride, despite her anger against him, in that he was the cause of her young cousin's untimely death, she could not stifle or kill her love for him.

It flourished and grew steadfastly, and when she heard, five years later, that the Piffers were returning to England and ordered to Clemen, her heart beat wildly with conflicting feelings.

Some time after they were stationed there Captain Desmond called on her, and she saw that he was unchanged. Again he essayed to win her, and again she gently rejected him, telling him she was unchanged, and offering him her friendship, with which poor crumb of comfort he was fain to be content. He continued to call on her, and one day asked if she would receive Elsie.

At first she demurred, though her pulses beat with rapture at the mere thought of seeing him again, but when his friend urged it she consented.

Their first meeting was full of embarrassment on both sides, only she melted first, having heard from Desmond that Elsie spent a portion of each day or night by the grave on the cliff, and that his grief for Gertrude's sad fate was keen and undying.

"Captain Elsie," she said one day, when she had gone to put flowers on Gertrude's grave and met him there, "have you nothing to explain?"

"Yes," he said, simply. "My conduct was an error—such an error as any man in my posi-

tion might have committed. Mrs. Linklater led me on to say frivolous, empty things to her. I did but jest; and she as lightly heard my tender words—words which she looked for ever as her due—I little dreamed my love would hear the light words, or take them seriously, and she spoke with such scorn and rapidity when we met in the picture-gallery, and refused so absolutely to hear my explanation, that I had no choice save to let her go."

"You know that night we received orders to march the following morning, and, in the hurry consequent upon our departure, I had no time to see her. Then pride—that wretched pride which has wrecked so many lives that gave fair promise—prevented my writing to her; and after—I heard she was—dead!" with a catch in his voice, and a "gloom around his heart—the gloom of stern remorse no after light shall ever wholly serve to chase away."

And then they both stood silently looking at the white cross that marked Gertrude Mayne's last resting-place, and across his mind came the lines,—

"Oh, once again to hold thy hand in mine;
Oh, once again as in the days of old,
To hear the sweet, low murmur of thy voice!
It may not be—thy hand is cold in death,
Thy voice no more can answer back to mine,
For thou art dead, and I am desolate."

He was "desolate." The only joy he had in life was his visits to Miss Mervyn. These became gradually more and more frequent. It consoled him to talk of the dead girl; and Margaret, now she knew of his error, was sweetly kind and consoling. Her soft voice soothed his ruffled spirits, her gentle ministrations were balm to his bruised soul. And at last, one day, he asked her could she make the sacrifice of becoming his wife.

"It would be no sacrifice, Sir Elsie," she answered, softly (Sir Geoffrey was dead, and he had come into the title and estates).

"You mean—that you care for me?" he said, in surprise, prompted thereto by something he saw in her lovely, dark eyes.

"I have loved you ever since I knew you," she acknowledged, candidly.

"And I have no love to give you," he said, regretfully; "it all lies buried there," nodding towards the churchyard on the cliff. "I can only give you esteem and respect."

"And they will content me," she said, quietly, putting her hands in his.

"You are a noble woman!" he said, drawing her to him and printing a passionless kiss on her white brow. "I will never give you cause to regret our marriage."

And he never did. In the years that came he was ever tender, devoted, kind, and in time he grew content and peaceful, while she was perfectly happy in the love of her bonny children, and the splendour of her magnificent home. Dudley Desmond, the man who loved her so unselfishly and undyingly, envied the dead woman sleeping so calmly under the willow on the brow of the cliff, whose base the white-tipped waves fret and wash unceasingly, as they sing their dirge and her requiem.

[THE END.]

A REGIMENTAL pigeon-post hereafter will form part of the regular equipment of every Russian field force when mobilised. During the last Russian Army manoeuvres, experiments with the birds were conducted on an extensive scale, and their utility was demonstrated. In no case did the birds fail to arrive with their messages sooner than a mounted messenger would have done.

THE most curious street-pavement in the world is that which has recently been put down in Lyons, France. It is of glass, the blocks being about eight inches square, each made up of sixteen smaller blocks. The glass blocks are so tightly fitted together that water cannot pass between them. As a pavement, glass is said to have greater resistance than stone. It is a poor conductor of cold, and ice will not form upon it.

ALL AMONG THE HEATHER.

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CHAPTER X.

MRS PENFOLD MAKES HERSELF DISAGREEABLE.

THERE was much consternation among the servants at the Grange when Mrs. Penfold behaved in this extraordinary manner, and for a second or two those who were in the Hall stood looking at the prostrate lady without attempting to approach her.

It was Elsie who first tried to lift her, so that her face might be uncovered, and who entreated the servants to carry her into a room and send for a doctor.

They did so readily enough, Mrs. Penfold's maid coming forward and relieving her mistress of her bonnet and gloves, though she too, looked at Elsie with a soiled expression of countenance, as though she feared there was something unseemly about her.

Before the doctor came Mrs. Maltby and her son returned, and when Elsie saw them she seized the opportunity of retiring to her own room.

She felt that she was no longer wanted, and she was puzzled and slightly alarmed by the effect which her face had had upon the new comer.

What happened in her absence she did not know, but as she was quite sure that she should be sent for if she were wanted, she did not come downstairs again until the gong sounded for dinner.

She was not a little surprised, therefore, to find Mrs. Penfold in the drawing-room, sitting bolt upright in the most uncomfortable chair, and looking as though it were more easy for the skies to fall than for her to give any sign of either painful or pleasurable emotion.

As Elsie came into the room the old lady fixed her eyes upon her with an unwavering stare, sufficiently offensive to be embarrassing to anyone, and our little heroine ventured to say, timidly,—

"I hope you are better, madam, and that you were not injured by your fall."

A faint spasm came over the face which had seemed carved out of wood, and a harsh voice replied curtly,—

"I'm well enough. Who are you?"

"I am Mrs. Maltby's secretary," was the quiet answer. "I helped to lift you when you fainted this afternoon, and I sent for the doctor, but I am glad to see that you are no worse for your sudden attack."

"I don't see what you have to be glad about," growled the old woman, offensively. "It won't make any difference to you whether I'm alive or dead."

Elsie made no answer to this. She had taken refuge in a book, and she pretended not to hear the ungrateful remark. She was beginning to understand, too, why Clarence and his mother had expressed so much consternation when they heard that Mrs. Penfold was coming on a visit to them.

But if Elsie thought that silence was going to serve her in this instance she was mistaken.

Mrs. Penfold repeated her remark still more aggressively, though she was not prepared for the sweetness with which the girl looked up from her book and replied, quietly,—

"No, I don't suppose that it will."

Mrs. Penfold was not mollified, but for the moment she was silent, not quite knowing how to begin the attack, and at this instant Mrs. Maltby joined them.

"Ah! Miss Heath," said the mistress of the house, more cordially than was her wont, "where have you been this afternoon? How did you amuse yourself?"

Elsie told her, adding that she thought Mrs. Maltby would have sent to her room for her if she had been wanted.

"Oh, no, I haven't wanted you; Mrs. Penfold has taken up most of my time since I came home. How do you feel now, aunt?" she asked, turning to her guest.

"I'm not your aunt," snapped out the elder

woman, sharply. "I am only a far-away cousin."

But again Mrs. Penfold's disagreeable remark was ignored, for Mrs. Maltby was speaking to Elsie in a low tone, and it was only when Clarence came into the room that the subdued conversation ceased.

The young man was evidently on his best behaviour; and Mrs. Penfold, who was always more amiable to the stronger sex than to her own, graciously took his arm to go to the dining-room, while his mother and Elsie followed.

Nothing very remarkable occurred that evening, but Elsie will remember it so long as she lives.

Every now and again Mrs. Penfold would look at her with an expression of repulsion on her wooden countenance, not unmingled with fear, until the girl, catching her eye on one of these occasions, asked curiously,—

"Do I remind you of anyone whom you have known, or do you think you have seen me before?"

"Seen you before? Certainly not, and don't want to see you again," was the abrupt answer that made Mrs. Maltby laugh; and Elsie, who felt more amused than offended, laughed also before she said,—

"Then I will try to keep out of your way while you are here."

Then she turned to Mrs. Maltby and remarked,—

"There are some letters which you said you wanted me to answer this evening. Shall I go about them?"

"Yes, I'll go with you," was the reply.

And glad to escape from the presence of her unamiable relative Mrs. Maltby accompanied her secretary to the study, where they both remained for the rest of the evening.

This was not by any means what Mrs. Penfold desired.

She had cultivated the bad habit of saying spiteful things, partly to relieve the pent-up spleen in her own discontented heart, and partly from the cruel pleasure of making those about her unhappy.

To be taken at her word, however, when she said she did not wish to see a person again was more than she counted upon, and she soon found that Clarence, who had exerted himself for a short time to be amusing, now when left alone with her, stretched his limbs, yawned, and declared that he was awfully sleepy.

"Don't go to sleep yet, but tell me about that girl who was here just now," she said, authoritatively.

"What am I to tell you about her?" he asked, with another yawn.

"Where did your mother pick her up?"

"I don't know—some mutual friend recommended her, I think."

"Who is she? To whom does she belong?" was the next question.

"Couldn't tell you to save my life," he answered, in the same indifferent tone. "She never talks about her people."

"Has she any people to talk about?" asked Mrs. Penfold, with intentional significance.

"Can't tell you, I'm sure; most folks have—too many sometimes," he observed, reflectively.

"I suppose you'd call her pretty?" said the old woman, looking at him steadily.

"No, I shouldn't," responded Clarence, trying to seem indifferent, and not quite succeeding. "She's either more or less than pretty."

"Humph!" snorted the old woman. "Then she's more, I suppose, you mean? You're not in love with her, are you?"

"What a preposterous question—the girl hasn't a penny," he exclaimed, angrily, flushing up, and completely taken aback by the directness of the attack.

"Perhaps she hasn't a penny now, but she may have," said the old woman, with her eyes still fixed upon him.

"Where will she get it?" he asked, still in a tone of intense annoyance.

"I might adopt her, and leave her all I have," was the old lady's next astounding remark.

"You!" he repeated, thrown off his guard by her utter inconsequence. "Why, you've just driven her from the room by your uncalled-for rudeness."

"That would not prevent me from adopting her if I made up my mind to do so," was the arrogant response.

"Not as far as you are concerned, perhaps," he retorted; "but she might have a word to say on the subject herself. She is a young lady who has a will of her own, and who won't mind letting you know it."

"Ah! you've found that out, have you?" asked this objectionable old woman, suddenly turning upon him. "I thought as much; and you've made all her feathers rise up against you. That's not the way to succeed, my boy; you must woo her with more deference, and let her see that you mean it, and that you want to marry her. I don't think she'll accept you; but she may."

"Good heavens, aunt! do you know that my mother would turn her out of the house at the bare suggestion of such a thing!" asked the young man, in genuine alarm. "You don't know how much mischief you may do. I wish you'd leave well alone."

"All right, my boy, go your own way," said the old lady, with a grim smile on her wooden face; "but I'll tell you one thing for your comfort—if you marry this girl you shall get my money between you, and if you don't you won't have one shiver of it, so you know how you stand."

There was something so aggravating in the tone and manner in which this was said that Clarence Maltby, who was usually on his guard with Mrs. Penfold, now lost his temper, and exclaimed defiantly,—

"You can't take Trebartha from me, whoever I may or may not marry."

"Can't I?" and the old lady laughed a low, mocking laugh, while her companion mentally compared her to one of the witches in *Macbeth*. "You don't know what I can do," she went on in the same mocking strain. "I have done a good many strange things in my time, and I may do something stranger still before I die; but go your own way. You're like your mother—blind as a bat to everything that isn't under your own nose."

And, having delivered herself of this uncompromising speech, Mrs. Penfold gathered up some tracts which she never read, though she always carried them about with her, and went off to her own room.

She had made all of those with whom she had dined more or less miserable, and having accomplished this feat she now felt on very good terms with herself.

Clarence Maltby, though highly incensed, not only with his elderly relative, but likewise with himself for having spoken so plainly about Trebartha, took very good care not to breathe a word of the subject under discussion to his mother.

He had many good reasons for this, the principal one at the moment being his desire to keep Elsie under his mother's roof, and he felt quite sure that she would be sent away if Mrs. Maltby for one moment suspected Mrs. Penfold's singular interest in the girl.

From this evening, however, Elsie acquired a new interest for the young couple.

There must be something about the girl which he had not previously observed, he argued, to induce his mother and Charlie Birch to take to her as they had done, and more marvellous still to make Mrs. Penfold wish him to marry her. For his relative was not the kind of person who would be likely to think any woman good enough to be his wife, or, if she thought that of him personally, she would not hold the same opinion when she regarded him as the future owner of Trebartha, and his wife as the future mistress of that place.

Elsie was very beautiful, no doubt. He looked at her with something like wonder in his eyes, as though she were a new revelation of feminine loveliness, as she came into the breakfast-room the next morning.

He did not greet her with an offensive com-

pliment, however, although for a few seconds she happened to be alone; and perceiving that he did not wish to annoy her, Elsie resisted the inclination she had felt to retreat when she found that the other ladies were not yet down.

As he simply said "Good morning," and then went on reading his newspaper, she responded, and took up a magazine which happened to be at hand, and both were silently reading, with almost the length of the room between them, when Mrs. Maltby and her guest joined them.

The latter looked from her kinsman to the girl, then back again to Clarence, and she gave vent to a mocking, disdainful laugh that sent the angry blood into the young man's face, though what there was to laugh about neither of the others could understand.

Mrs. Penfold, however, was quite as peculiar in her way as Mrs. Maltby, and she was also very much more offensive in showing her peculiarities.

They got over breakfast comfortably enough, though it was singular to remark how the visitor seemed to be attracted towards the young secretary, though there was at the same time a mutual feeling of antagonism between them.

Elsie was surprised at herself, for she had never in her life felt so pugnacious as she did when Mrs. Penfold addressed her or insisted upon her company.

Oddly enough, too, instead of repelling the elder woman, this thinly-veiled hostility won her admiration, and now and again she muttered odd sentences under her breath, too indistinct for those about her to hear, and too vague for the listeners to understand.

But she haunted Elsie; she always wanted to be near her, and she even came to the study, and, taking Mrs. Maltby's easy chair, settled herself there although she meant to spend the whole morning in the little room.

If Elsie felt annoyed by this behaviour, Mrs. Maltby was in despair.

Had Mrs. Penfold condescended to knit or to sew, Mrs. Maltby might have managed to get along, but she did neither; she simply sat and stared, until the mistress of the house could endure it no longer, and at length she rose from her seat impatiently, pushed some letters towards her secretary, and said,—

"Answer those, my dear; you will know what to say. I can't do any work this morning, aunt. Are you coming with me, or are you going to stay with Miss Heath?"

"I'm very comfortable where I am," was the answer; "when I'm tired I'll move."

Mrs. Maltby cast a look of mingled amusement and commiseration at her secretary, and then quitted the room.

Probably she was not sorry to have some one at hand whose society her objectionable relative preferred to her own.

For a short time Elsie wrote, and the old woman stared at her in silence, when suddenly she asked,—

"Do you like living here?"

If the question had come from any other quarter our heroine might not have answered it so promptly and without thinking of what she said.

"Yes, thank you."

"Is your father living?" inquired Mrs. Penfold, a second or two afterwards.

"I don't know," replied the girl, shortly.

"Your mother, then?"

"I don't know," repeated Elsie, monotonously.

"Have you any sisters or brothers living?" persisted the old woman.

Still the same answer: "I don't know."

"You don't know anything, it seems to me," remarked Mrs. Penfold, gravely; "have you ever heard of or seen anybody belonging to you?"

"Not that I know of," was the reluctant reply.

"But you must know something about your origin; you must have friends—somebody must have taken care of you. Do you mind telling me what you do know about yourself?" persisted this inquisitive old woman.

"Yes, I do mind doing so very much," replied Elsie, driven at last to defend herself; "what I do and what I do not know about my origin is my own business."

"Very well, keep your business to yourself, and much good may it do you," retorted Mrs. Penfold, hotly; "and if ever you've played the fool you've done it now, in losing your temper with me, young woman."

And having said this the angry lady left the room, slamming the door behind her.

"What an impertinent old thing!" thought our heroine when she found herself alone. "I didn't want to be rude to her, but really her questions were more than I could submit to answer."

And yet it was a pity that Elsie's patience had not lasted a while longer, and that she had not told her persistent questioner the little about herself that there was to tell.

But we are not always wise, neither are we always patient, and Elsie's sweet and gentle temper had been greatly tried of late.

For a time she went on writing answers to the letters which Mrs. Maltby had handed to her, but at length she had finished the last; and, having stamped and directed them, and placed them on the hall-table for a servant to post, she took her hat and favourite book and went out into the garden, intending to spend the next hour in a secluded arbour at the extreme limit of the grounds.

Here she seated herself, and, wishing to forget the many things that troubled her, she opened the book and began to read.

She had not read a couple of pages, however, before someone stood between her and the sunlight, and looking up, she saw Clarence Maltby.

"Does your mother want me?" she asked, rising to her feet, and feeling suddenly anxious to escape from him.

But he blocked up the entrance so that she could not pass unless he stepped aside, and this he showed no intention of doing.

On the contrary, he extended his arms and said exultingly,—

"You can't get away now; I've got you to myself. The old woman and my mother have gone for a drive, and you and I are going to have a pleasant hour together, my dear."

She made no answer, though her face became very pale, and she strained her ears to catch the faintest sound, but she could distinguish nothing but the song of the birds, and the sweet warblers seemed to mock at her terror.

CHAPTER XI.

CLARENCE SURPRISES HIMSELF.

"You needn't be so awfully afraid of me; I'm not going to eat you," remarked Clarence Maltby, seeing that Elsie was looking as pale as if she were going to faint.

"I don't like being kept here against my will; let me pass, if you please," was the answer.

But she did not take a step forward as she spoke.

To do so would have been to meet his extended arms, for, standing where he did, he completely blocked up the entrance to the arbour.

"Why don't you come on?" he asked, with a triumphant smile; "I'm ready to meet you half-way."

Elsie made no immediate answer, but she frowned and resumed her seat.

After her first momentary terror she recovered her self-possession, and as she now looked steadily at her unwelcome suitor she said, disdainfully,—

"I presume that you consider your conduct manly! I do not. You know quite well, Mr. Maltby, that if your mother finds you here talking to me that she will not only be very angry, but she will visit her anger upon me, and not upon you; therefore I think it most ungenerous on your part to expose me to misconstruction."

"Ungenerous!"

The word struck Clarence Maltby as a stronger word would not have done.

If Elsie had told him that his conduct was dishonourable he would have laughed, because he had in his time done many dishonourable things; but it was such a wonderful circumstance for any girl to appeal to his generosity that it roused whatever spark of that feeling there was in his heart, and he dropped his arms, and answered with some compunction,—

"Well, yes, I'm afraid that's true; the matter always is unjust in that way, and I don't want to drive you from the house, or to make you uncomfortable while you are here; but hang it all, I must talk to you sometimes, and you never give a fellow a chance."

"You may talk as long as you like if you will let me walk about the garden, or even sit down there," said Elsie, desperately. "I don't mind your mother seeing you talk to me; it is your being here in this secluded spot that would naturally make her angry."

"And you won't run away from me if I do let you out!" he asked, suspiciously.

"No, I won't!" she answered, eager to be free.

"And you will let me talk to you as long as I like!" was the next stipulation.

"Yes, provided you don't say anything to offend me."

"Very well," he assented, stopping aside, but instantly changing his mind he added,—

"You ought to give me a kiss first."

"That I shall not do!" she exclaimed, her eyes flashing, and her pale cheeks flushing with anger. "I wonder at your daring to suggest such a thing."

He laughed loudly.

She looked so beautiful in her anger, and she seemed so sincerely surprised at his presumption, that he could not resist the temptation of saying,—

"There isn't much that I shouldn't be bold enough to suggest if I thought I should get it; but I am going to be on my good behavior now, and you are not to run away from me."

So saying, he turned and walked away from the arbour, Elsie following him.

Clarence Maltby was surprised at his own moderation, and began to think that he must really be a very much better fellow than he had hitherto believed himself to be.

The appeal to his generosity and manliness had really been a success, and he found that Elsie did not shrink from him as she had previously done.

It was not that she liked him any better than hitherto, but she felt that she must fulfil her share of the implied compact, and she was prepared to do so.

"Don't you think it would be very nice to have a couple of chairs under that tree?" she asked, pointing to a wide-spreading oak that stood within full view of the windows of the house.

"I think it would be just as nice to sit down in the middle of St. Paul's Churchyard or Trafalgar Square," he replied grimly; "but I'll get the chairs if you like."

"Thank you," replied Elsie.

And he went to fetch the chairs himself, that being less troublesome than calling a servant to get them.

But as he did so, he muttered,—

"Aunt Pen was right. I must play my game patiently; she wants lots of humouring, but I think I shall get her in hand at last. I wonder what the old cat meant last night by promising me her money if I married Miss Heath! Wanted to spite my mother, I suspect. She couldn't have had any better motive!"

He came back to the shade of the tree, bringing the chairs with him, but he was not very well pleased when he saw Elsie take from her pocket a small case, from which she unrolled a strip of embroidery and the coloured silks with which she was working the flowers upon it.

"Oh, hang it all! You're not going to sew, are you?" he asked, with an expression of annoyance. "I hate a woman to sew when I'm talking to her."

"Why?" asked Elsie, feeling that she must make some remark.

"Because she only gives me half of her attention," was the answer.

Elise looked at him, and repressed an inclination to laugh, as she said, quietly,—

"I have no doubt I shall be able to pay proper attention to what you say, Mr. Maltby, and do my work at the same time; for, after all, you cannot have anything very important to tell me."

"You may call it important or not, but I call it so," he retorted in an aggrieved tone, while she proceeded to thread a needle; "and I think when a man tells you that he admires you more than any girl he ever saw, that you might drop that infernal work and look at him."

"But suppose I don't wish to be admired!" asked the girl, carelessly, and without lifting her eyes to emphasise her question.

"Oh, come now, that's all humbug; every woman likes to be admired."

"You are mistaken," said Elise, now looking steadily at him. "I am an exception to your rule, for I do not like it; and since by my promise I am bound to listen to you, I wish you would select a more pleasant topic than your fancied admiration for myself."

"Pleasant, indeed! What could be more pleasant!" he asked, angrily.

"Suppose we talk about Miss Birch?" suggested Elise; "she is coming here on a visit very shortly. Have you known her very long?"

"Hang Miss Birch," he replied, roughly. "I don't want her. She's one of the women that I can't endure, she'll peck her husband's life out of him when she gets one. By Jove, talk of the devil—"

He stopped abruptly, and Elise, looking up quickly, saw Mrs. Barlistone, Miss Birch and Mr. Kingswood coming towards them.

She rose at once, thankful, beyond the power of words to express, that her enforced *à-tête* with Clarence Maltby was at an end.

Until it was over she did not realise the intense strain that had been upon her; and she felt so unnerved now that she fairly trembled as she spoke to Charlie.

Clarence Maltby was annoyed at the interruption, but being at home he was obliged to be polite, and he called a servant and told him to bring chairs, and to let his mother know they were in the garden when she returned from her drive.

Mrs. Barlistone had come over to invite the Maltbys to an evening party that was rather an impromptu affair, and when she learnt that Mrs. Penfold was visiting them, she suggested that they should all come to dinner.

"I am going to keep you for the night if Mrs. Maltby will spare you," remarked Charlie, addressing himself to Elise. "I am sure you like dancing; I never met a girl that didn't, and the best of the fun is always at the end."

"You are very kind," replied our heroine, gratefully, "and I shall greatly enjoy it if I can stay."

Clarence frowned, but made no comment, for he and Kingswood were talking about horses and jockeys, as though they had been a couple of grooms.

Presently Mrs. Maltby and Mrs. Penfold returned from their drive, and shortly after this the gong sounded for luncheon, and they all went into the dining-room.

It was an understood thing at Maltby Grange that luncheon was a meal to which anybody who had any acquaintance with the mistress would drop in without invitation, and Mrs. Barlistone and her party sat down to table as a matter of course.

Mrs. Penfold was hungry, and therefore had no time to be particularly disagreeable, and the party at the table was pleasant enough, Charlie and Elise doing the greater part of the talking.

"You and Mr. Maltby had better come home with us, Miss Heath, and play lawn tennis," said Charlie, as they were rising from the table. "You'll spare them, won't you, Mrs. Maltby?"

"No, you'd much better stay here and play," replied that lady. "It will be very dull for Mrs. Penfold and me to be left alone."

Charlie demurred, but Elise seconded the suggestion, adding that Mrs. Maltby would pro-

bably want her to write some letters in the evening.

She dreaded the possibility of having to return at night to the Grange with Clarence Maltby as her solitary escort, and was determined at any cost to avoid it.

Mrs. Barlistone, whose husband was from home for a couple of days, was quite willing to stay where she was, so Charlie's objections were overruled, and soon after luncheon they went out to the tennis-ground.

Charlie Birch was the most generous-hearted of women, and was quite above any petty jealousy, but she could not help seeing that both of the gentlemen were anxious to secure Elise for a partner, and that Maltby frowned and Kingswood looked triumphant when the fair secretary fell to the lot of the latter.

When a woman is young, pretty, and rich, and has been much run after in consequence, such an experience as this is not a pleasant one, be she ever so good-natured; and if the truth must be told Charlie did not enjoy this afternoon as much as she ought to have done. She was, however, impartial enough in her own mind to exonerate Elise from any attempt to win the admiration of either of the gentlemen; indeed our poor little heroine was so absent-minded, or else was so preoccupied with the game, that she paid little or no heed to the low-toned words, meant only for her ear, that were nothing in themselves, but that were intended to imply a great deal, and with which Kingswood occasionally favoured her.

The three married ladies sat at a distance from the players, alternately talking and watching the game.

Suddenly, Mrs. Maltby, who never seemed to notice anybody, startled Elise by saying,—

"You don't seem to care much for the game, Miss Heath! What is the matter with you?"

"I don't feel quite well," was the answer. "I am tired, and rather sleepy."

"I hope you are not sickening for any of the dreadful complaints that are about!" exclaimed Mrs. Maltby, in sudden alarm.

Her very latest hobby was the sanitary condition of dwellings, and she had heard so much about diseases of late that she began to suspect that a simple headache was the sure precursor of a fever.

But Elise, who was not easily alarmed, only laughed as she said,—

"Oh, no, I don't think it is anything at all serious. Those letters this morning rather bothered me because you were not by to tell me exactly what to write, and my head ached when I left the study."

"No wonder," growled Mrs. Penfold; "it's enough to make anybody's head ache to sit stewing in that hot little room hour after hour. I thought so this morning."

"Then it's a pity you didn't select some other room in which to spend the morning," remarked the hostess, frigidly.—"The study does for me well enough."

Elise had returned to the players, and finding herself so closely watched she made a successful effort to throw off her depression.

Well enough she knew that it was not the close study, but the sitting alone in the arbour that had so depressed her; and she wondered if the quiet lesson she had given Clarence Maltby would have the effect of making him treat her with more deference, and of refraining from troubling her with what he was pleased to call his admiration for herself.

She played on for some little time, and then the arrival of other visitors broke up the game.

Colonel St. Vincent and his daughter Barbara were the newcomers, and Elise looked at them curiously; for though she had not previously seen them she had heard their names several times since she had been here, and she wondered whether what she had heard about them was true.

The Colonel was tall and gray, severe looking and soldierly.

It was only natural, of course, that, having spoken or bowed to those present, whose faces he knew, he should take a chair and set it down close to Mrs. Maltby, to whom he devoted all his attention.

He might have had something of importance to say to her about her schools, her sham political intrigues, or her sanitary mania—probably he had.

At any rate, he seemed very much interested in his subject, and the lady to whom he talked listened with pleased attention.

Elise saw this, and she likewise observed that Clarence Maltby every now and again cast angry glances at the elderly couple, and that he resisted all Miss St. Vincent's attempts to concentrate his attention upon herself.

Yet they seemed to be very old friends of the Maltbys, for the young people addressed each other by their Christian names, and when Elise offered to relinquish her place in the game to Miss St. Vincent that young lady accepted it at once.

The rest of the players were not well pleased with this, but our heroine was not at all sorry to be able to take a chair at a little distance, and to watch the game without, however, taking any real interest in it.

She was still suffering from the nervous and repressed agitation caused by Clarence Maltby's presence in the arbour, and though she had succeeded in reducing him to something like proper behaviour, she could not help feeling that he had established a sort of right to talk to her, that if persisted in by him might lead to very unpleasant consequences.

"If I could only get away from this place, only get something else to do;" she thought sadly. "It isn't the amount of work that I have to do here; I could do ten times as much, willingly and with comfort. It is that dreadful young man that terrifies me. The idea of his presumption in wanting to kiss me! I think I shall do it if he ever attempts to do so!"

Her thoughts must have been reflected in her face, for a startled look came into her eyes, and she became suddenly pale, as a sharp keen-edged voice at her elbow remarked, "You've been a good deal put out to-day, Miss Heath!"

"I!" she exclaimed, turning quickly, and meeting Mrs. Penfold's steady grey eyes.

"Yes, you!" was the answer; "something has worried you. What is it?"

"Nothing, thank you," replied Elise, coldly; but, recollecting herself, she added, "nothing at least that would interest you."

Then changing her tone, she said with genuine admiration,—

"Look at Miss St. Vincent, doesn't she play splendidly!"

"Yes, and her father plays his game just as well," responded the old woman drily. "There's no fool like an old fool, particularly if she's got money of her own, and thinks she can do what she likes with it."

Elise glanced in the direction indicated by this remark, and even she could not misunderstand the object of Colonel St. Vincent's visit; and, judging from the pleased look on Mrs. Maltby's face, his suit could not be considered an unwelcome one.

"It will make a considerable difference to Clarence if his mother does make a second marriage," continued Mrs. Penfold, looking intently at her companion's face.

"Will it?" was the indifferent response.

"Yes, he will no longer be master here," said the strange old woman; "neither will he be able to draw upon his mother's purse as he does now; and as for you, your occupation will be gone. The Colonel isn't like poor Maltby; he won't let his wife follow her own devices, and fling her money away as she has done."

"Can he help it?" asked Elise, feeling that it was useless to try to allude Mrs. Penfold, or to get her to talk on any other subject.

"Well, legally he can't," replied the old lady, shaking her head; "but practically he will. And then there is that big daughter of his; she will live with them, and if Clarence doesn't marry her—as he won't—she'll drive him out of the house. But she'll get you out of the house first, Miss Heath—she doesn't approve of you."

"That is very sad," responded Elise, with undisguised contempt; "but I don't think she will have any difficulty in driving me away."

"No, neither do I," observed the old lady, significantly. Then, as though moved by a sudden impulse, she said,—

"You can come to me if you like when you leave here, I sometimes want a companion."

Elise looked at her in astonishment, then she laughed heartily as she said,—

"You told me last evening that you never wished to see my face again."

"I've no need to wish to see it," retorted Mrs. Penfold, rising from her seat, and speaking with unnecessary bitterness; "for it reminds me at every turn of the face of one who is dead!"

And having said this she walked away, leaving Elise to look after her with feelings of vague dismay.

(To be continued.)

COUSIN MAX.

—O—

THE little shop was closed for the night. People did not buy second-hand books enough after dark to pay for gas, the proprietor said, so he was enjoying his own reading in the sitting-room.

It was a small room back of the shop; a poor room, too, where each article of furniture seemed reduced to the last stage of shabbiness, and the old man, reading in the circle of brightness, under the lamp-shade, looked as old, as worn out, as shabby as his surroundings. Suddenly a clear, sweet voice, with the musical ring of youth in its joyous accents, roused him.

"Do I look very nice, grandfather?"

Mr. Denman pushed aside his book, straightened his spectacles, and looked up, a smile on his lips, and a brightness in his eyes that only Millie's voice could bring there.

He saw, standing very erect before him, a quaint little figure in a white muslin dress of a fashion of twenty years before, with straight full skirt, very stiff, and smooth, a low-necked, short-sleeved body, and a little ruffle of lace for its sole trimming. From the soft lace rose shoulders round and white as an infant's, a slender throat, and then a face of such rare loveliness that it was small wonder the answer was an emphatic one.

"You look very nice indeed, my darling! Is this a new dress?"

"No, indeed, grandfather. Do you think I would buy new dresses when there is that great trunk full of mamma's, that fit me now exactly? Millie says evening dresses are exactly alike, and so I chose this one."

"But—were you going out?"

"Have you forgotten, grandfather, Brenda Leigh asked me to her party! She 'comes out' this evening. We have been such dear friends at school, and I know that she would come here often if you had not forbidden me to ask any one here. But she is very fond of me; and, grandfather, her cousin, Max Melton, is here from Liverpool."

"Indeed! So you are to see your hero?"

"My hero! Oh, no; he quite belongs to Brenda. But she has told me so much about him—how noble he is, and how much good he has done wherever he goes—that I must admire him. And I want to like the husband of my very best friend."

"Oh! her husband, is he?"

"Oh, you dear, forgetful grandfather! Have I not told you before that there is a lot of money, left by an old aunt to Max and Brenda if they are married? If either one refuses, the money all goes to the other."

"Yes, yes; I remember. But this party—you cannot go alone."

"No; Millie will go with me, and fetch me. She must be ready now." And Millie tied a white hood over her short, brown curls, and wrapped herself in a great shawl. "Good-night, dear grandfather!"

The warmest of kisses pressed the withered lips, and Millie flitted away, happy in the anticipation of her friend's welcome, and the dimly imagined glories of the first party to which,

in all the seventeen years of her life, she had ever been invited.

Two hours later, in a large, brilliantly lighted room, filled with guests from the very cream of society, a lady and gentleman stood conversing. The lady, a pretty blonde, was the *débütante* of the evening, Miss Brenda Leigh; and the gentleman, many long years her senior, seemed on terms of intimacy, as he questioned her freely about the guests in the room.

"One forgets even old friends in a long absence," he said, in a leisurely tone that was habitual to him; "and I see many new ones here."

"But you will soon know them all, if you stay with us all winter, Max. There are so many I want you to know and like. There are the Greyson girls in pink; they are worth a fortune in their own right; and there is Nora Creighton; is she not handsome? And the tall, fair blonde talking to mamma is the great heiress, Julia Leverett."

"And who," he asked, in his cool, leisurely manner, "is the pretty girl on the sofa, who looks as if she wants to cry?"

"I dare say she does," said Brenda. "That is one of my school-fellows, Millie Clarke; and I invited her for this evening because we were such fast friends at school; but if I had known she was going to come here looking like that, I would never have asked her. Why, that dress is disgraceful, and she hasn't an ornament!" And Brenda arranged her costly bracelets, and toyed with her diamonds, glancing complacently at her own rich dress.

"I see," said Max, gravely.

But when he had strolled through the conservatory with Brenda, and listened to her rapid, giggling speeches some ten minutes longer, he resigned her to a mustached dandy, and quietly but persistently worked his way to the sofa where Millie still sat, struggling with her mortification.

Bowing gravely, he said,—

"May I take something of a host's privilege, and introduce myself as Mrs. Leigh's nephew, Max Melton?"

The large, shy, grey eyes that had been fixed upon the carpet pattern were lifted quickly.

"Oh!" with a quick drawn breath, "are you Max? I know so much about you!"

"Indeed!"

"Brenda talked so often of her cousin Max," said Millie, blushing brightly, with a sudden fear of having been forward.

"Then, since you know me so well, perhaps you will do me the honour to dance the next waltz with me?"

"I should like it so much, only, only I think you had better not. I—" there was an evident battle here against rising tears—"it is my first party, and I did not know—and there was no one to tell me—and it was a dress of my mother's—she died when she was only nineteen, and I did not think about the fashion. Millie did it up beautifully for me, and I thought it was nice until I saw the rest. But, you see, there is not one in the room looks as I do."

"Not one," he thought, looking down upon the exquisitely lovely face, and wondering how many of the ladies present would give her jewels and finery in exchange for such rare perfection of beauty. But aloud he said,—

"It is quite evident that you do not know that to own an old-fashioned dress nowadays is to attain an enviable distinction."

Yet while he spoke he could see Brenda looking with scorn upon the muslin that she had told her mother was "neither one thing nor the other; not old enough to be aesthetic, but simply out of style."

"Perhaps you do not care for dancing?" Max said, after a patient waiting of some minutes.

"Oh! but I do! And no one has asked me yet. I am sure I dance, for we all were taught at Madame Despard's; but—but—" The childish lips quivered again, though bravely pressed together.

Guessing something of how deeply Brenda had stung this sensitive nature by her reception, Max dropped into an easy chair, close beside the sofa, saying,—

"I imagine we are fellow-sufferers, Miss

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Denman. I know but very few people here, and have a 'lone, lorn' feeling, even in this crowd. But your name is very familiar to me. One of my dearest friends, a professor in the university where I was educated, was Edward Denman, and his wife was named Millie."

"My father! my mother!" cried Millie. "Did you know them? I was only a baby when they both died, sixteen years ago."

"I remember. It was the year that I graduated that Professor Denman died. I did not know that his wife, too—"

"Mamma died first," Millie, said, softly; "but there was only one month between."

With this bond between them the two forgot the gay crowd around them, Millie hungrily listening to the memories her grave companion imparted to her of her father and the young wife Max remembered so well.

It was better for Millie that Mollie came early for her nursing, and the evening had scarcely begun for Brenda's guests when Millie stole away home, all the mortification, the hurt, sore feeling of her reception, forgotten in the keen pleasure of her last hour, in which the grave, middle-aged man had talked to her of her parents.

"He is not at all like the hero I imagined, grandfather," she said, nestling down at the old man's side as she told her experiences. "I had no idea he was so much older than Brenda."

"He must be nearly forty, if he graduated the year your father died, dear."

"He looks so; but oh, grandfather, he seemed so far above the young men around him. None of them spoke to me, but I could hear them talking to the ladies they were with, and—I don't think I should care, even if I was pretty, to be told so in such broad terms, grandfather. I should be afraid the person who told me thought me silly as well."

"Perhaps he would. And so you are content now, Millie, to give up parties for the future and never to see your hero again?"

"Quite content. I hope I am not proud or vain, but I don't care to feel so small again as I did last evening, and I think Brenda will not care ever to see me again."

But, although Millie was quite right in this last surmise, there was one of the guests of the important evening who could not drop so easily the recollection of the soft grey eyes that had so frankly met his; the low, sweet voice that asked such eager questions; the slim, graceful figure, so quaintly attired. World-worn even beyond his years, Max Melton had spent so many of these in a struggle for fortune that love had seemed to him a far-off, impossible dream. He had drifted into a tacit consent to the terms of his great aunt's will, without giving the subject much consideration until Mrs. Leigh's letter informing him that Brenda was nineteen and had left school, and inviting him to pay her a visit, suddenly brought him face to face with his future life.

He had won his way from a boyhood of comparative poverty to the possession of ample means and the money of his deceased great aunt offered no temptation to him.

But into his lonely heart stole visions of a home, a wife, a dear companion to share every thought of his brain, every pleasure of his life.

Young love comes without thought, without preparation, a glad, rosy vision of impossible bliss. But the love of middle life takes reason into counsel, and Max was not a boy to rush into mad dreams.

Yet the sweet hope roused by his aunt's letter, came again and again to fill his thoughts, and an ideal of pure, sweet girlhood, of a shy, tender maiden who would trust her happiness to his keeping, was suddenly confronted by a bold, giggling school girl, who met him as her property without one impulse of maidenly reserve. Two days of intercourse with Brenda Leigh had quite decided him to return speedily to Liverpool, when at the party given partly in his honour he met Millie.

Had he unconsciously founded his own ideal upon his recollection of his old teacher's wife, he wondered, when Millie so entirely met his dream? Was there yet, in this heartless world, one pure, untouched heart that knew nothing of fashion or glitter, yet was content in obscurity? Some-

thing of the child's life he could guess in her conversation, and that little was enough to detain him near to her to learn more.

It was not difficult to introduce himself to Mr. Denman as one of his son's old pupils, and it seemed to the old man as if a stone was lifted from his heart as Max, evening after evening, found his way to the shabby sitting-room behind the book-store, leaving ever with a deeper love for the sweetest little maiden he had ever known, and gathering into his own keeping the first pure, strong love of her young heart.

The winter had passed when Max Melton asked the old bookseller to give him his one treasure.

"You love her, and you are willing to give up your aunt's fortune for her sake?" Mr. Denman asked.

"My aunt's fortune! So you have heard of that! It was all settled months ago. Brenda has the whole, and is engaged to the prettiest little top who has figured in society this winter. She says my grave face frightens her, and she would think she had married her grandfather if I was her husband."

"And you love my Millie?"

"I love her," was the quiet, grave answer.

"Although her sole wardrobe is the one her mother left sixteen years ago?"

"In spite of that appalling fact!"

"And she loves you. Loves you with her whole heart. I believe I act for the child's happiness when I give my glad consent to her marriage with a man I have learned to respect

and love as I respect and love but few. And now I will tell you why Millie's future has weighed heavily upon my heart. I have not neglected her, though she has lived so quietly here with me.

"She has been educated in the best schools, and I know the polish of fashionable life would come easily to her natural refinement, were it ever needed. But it was not because I should leave her to struggle with poverty that I trembled for her future, but because the fortune you have resigned is not one-fourth of the one Millie will inherit at my death."

"And you live so quietly?"

"So humbly, because I am content in my old home, and I did not want Millie to marry a fortune-hunter. But now," and his hand grasped that of his companion, "I am more than content. Are you sorry you have won a wood-violet who has grown to such sweet perfection in the shade, instead of a flaunting garden tulip?"

But Max answered only by a smile, for at that moment Millie came in, and in his eyes, as they rested on her face, was a proud love, a perfect content, that was better than words.

And if Brenda, fluttering through life like a gaudy butterfly, wonders openly how Millie can forego all those pleasures that her fortune places within her reach, Millie knows where deeper happiness can be found in the quiet charities, the many works of benevolence to which she gives time and money under the guidance of her girlhood's hero, Cousin Max.

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SOCIETY.

THE Queen during the last week of her stay in Scotland made shorter drives than is her wont. This was attributed to Her Majesty's anxiety as to the despatches about the course of events in South Africa.

THE German Emperor has prepared for publication the diary of his tour in Palestine. It describes the progress of his journey day by day, and gives the Emperor's impressions on the scenery and incidents which he witnessed. The book will be illustrated from photographs taken by the Empress.

THE Princess of Wales's life at Sandringham, though a quiet one, is always well occupied. Her Royal Highness is a delightful hostess. A proof of her niceness is that when the brothers De Rœcke were guests at Sandringham the Princess would not ask them to sing, because much as she delighted in their talent she was their hostess, and wished them to know they were asked as friends. The gifted brothers, however, divining the Princess's motive, asked to be permitted to sing, and the permission was delightedly given, upon which the Princess was asked to choose their songs. At the end of the evening the Royal lady shook hands with each of them, and said, "You have given me very great pleasure to-night."

THE Empress Frederic, who has been advised to winter in the South, has taken the Villa Margiola on the Gulf of Spezia. The villa, which is out of the beaten track of winter visitors, is a fine one with beautiful grounds. A small yacht or despatch vessel of the German navy will be placed at her Majesty's disposal during her stay. The Empress has always had a great love for Italy and is pleased that she is advised to winter there. The Empress has not been very well of late, although happily nothing at all serious in the matter. Her Majesty is deeply interested in the war, as she has English interests as strongly at heart as ever, and is even before German Empress a British Princess. The Prince of Wales is very fond of his elder sister, who warmly reciprocates his affection.

THE railway car in which the Queen and her suite travel from Scotland resembles a very luxurious flat on wheels. It is on the most perfectly made springs, so that the motion of the train is hardly felt. The ceilings are thoroughly padded, and the floors covered with the softest and thickest of carpets. Every compartment contains a set of electric bells, by means of which the train can be stopped at any moment. The two saloons actually occupied by Her Majesty are always placed in the very middle of the train, and when she alights from them she does so by means of steps, which are let down as from an old-fashioned carriage. The Queen never travels without her private despatch boxes, and also certain small trunks containing old letters and souvenirs which she always keeps with her.

To her love of cycling the Duchess of Fife adds the gentle craft of Isaac Walton. When at Mar Lodge she spends whole days with her rod and line upon the banks of the Dee, dressed in the Duff tartan and wearing a simple sailor hat, and occasionally a scarlet toque. Her favourite part for fishing is just above the Lynn of Dee, one of the most lovely spots in the romantic district; and one can well understand how the Duchess, with her sweet and quiet nature, so averse from public show and ceremonial, enjoys the meditative sport in the midst of the solitude of the over-lasting hills, with no sound save the rushing of Dee's turbulent stream over its rocky bed. The Duchess invariably distributes the spoil of her sport amongst the poor of the district, or sends it to charitable institutions. The Duke finds his amusement in sport of a more exciting character. He is an enthusiastic huntsman, and the hills which rise behind Mar Lodge are well stocked with deer; he is also a noted "shot."

STATISTICS.

THE takings of London theatres and music-halls exceed £1,500,000 a year.

MORE than 2,000 people make a living in Paris by fortune-telling, their total yearly earnings being estimated at £300,000.

THE catacombs of Rome extend 530 miles in length, and contain, it is estimated, the remains of 6,000,000 human bodies.

FRANCE loses every year by infectious and contagious diseases 240,000 lives, or nearly double the number of lives lost in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870.

A PHILOSOPHICAL statistician calculates that in the year 2000 there will be 1,700,000,000 people who speak English, and that the other European languages will be spoken by only 500,000,000 people.

GEMS.

To let a man know that you recognise and rejoice in some good quality of his is to bless him with a new heart and stimulant.

WHERE the conceptions of duty and pleasure always associated in our own thoughts, the one would be sweetened, the other dignified, and both would be raised to a higher plane.

BENEFICENCE should never be exercised at random, nor upon irrational impulse, but should be the outcome and expression of a disposition trained and nourished in the atmosphere of human friendship.

HOUSEHOLD TREASURES.

RAISIN PICKLE.—Two and one-half pounds raisins, three dozen medium-sized cucumber pickles, one quart vinegar, three cups light brown sugar, two tablespoonfuls white mustard seeds, two tablespoonfuls celery seeds, a little mace and stick cinnamon, and one small teaspoonful ground black pepper. Boil spices, sugar and vinegar to a rich syrup; put in raisins and let cook until plump and clear, and pour all over the chopped cucumbers. If this amount of syrup does not cover pickles, make another quart of vinegar, adding more spices and sugar.

ICE CREAM.—Take four breakfast-cups of milk, two tablespoonfuls cornflour, half-pound sugar, one teaspoonful essence of vanilla; heat the milk and add to it the cornflour wet with a little cold milk; let it boil, then stir in the sugar and vanilla, and set it aside to get quite cold. Then freeze it. Any other flavour may be added instead of vanilla, lemon or strawberry; a tablespoonful of chocolate may be boiled with the cornflour, and is good for a change. The cream may be made with skim milk, and an egg put in well beaten up after it has boiled; that makes it a little yellow.

A RABBIT PUDDING.—Take a fleshy young rabbit, skin it, well wash it, and cut it into joints, and place it in a stewpan with a large onion, two carrots, a bay-leaf, and four long peppers. Cover with stock, and let it stew gently for an hour and a half. Take up the rabbit, remove the bones, and pass the meat through a mincing-machine; then add to it two tablespoonfuls fine breadcrumbs, half a teaspoonful grated lemon rind, pepper and salt to taste, and moisten with two well-beaten eggs. Now grease a basin and garnish it with strips of the carrot which was boiled with the rabbit; press the mixture into the basin, cover with buttered paper, and steam for an hour. Meanwhile, boil some macaroni in short lengths, and put a ring of it on the dish. Sift chopped parsley over, and in the centre place the pudding. Serve a little good gravy separately in a sauce-trie.

MISCELLANEOUS.

THE Christmas Tree grows in twenty-three countries.

ALREADY the holly for Christmas is being tended.

IN Cornwall the Yule Log is called the "mock."

THE old Christmas mummers were the forerunners of our modern pantomime.

IN old times the Yule Log, after being half-consumed, was laid aside till the next year, when it was used to light the new Yule Log.

IT is supposed that the average depth of sand in the deserts of Africa is from thirty to forty feet.

IN the Philippines the parting benediction is bestowed in the form of rubbing one's friend's face with one's hand.

THE Malay language is spoken by more than 40,000,000 persons. It is said to be easy to learn, as it has almost no grammar.

IN China an inferior upon horseback meeting a superior diamonds and waits till the other has passed.

THE city of Santa Cruz, U.S.A., is, perhaps, the only municipality in which water is furnished free to the inhabitants for domestic purposes.

THERE are no "alums" in Berlin. Even in the poorest quarters of the city the streets are paved with asphalt and kept scrupulously clean.

WHALES teeth form the cologne of the Fiji Islands. They are painted white and red, the red teeth being worth about twenty times as much as the white.

THE waspall bowl was an invariable accompaniment of the New Year among the Saxons and ancient Germans. The name is derived from the Saxon wasshall, an expression equivalent to "to your health."

FACETIE.

SHE: "If I were to die, you would never get another wife like me." HE: "What makes you think I'd ever want another like you?"

MR. DE FISH: "What lovely half-Miss Sweetster has!" MRS. DE FISH: "Yes. She doesn't have to economise in anything."

MOTHER: "Genevieve, why did you suffer Mr. Bridges to kiss you last night?" Genevieve: "I did not suffer, mamma."

MRS. NEIGHBOURS: "How do like your new servant?" MRS. SUBARBA: "Why, we haven't any new servant. Our girl has been with us for nearly four days!"

LADY of the house (to applicant for a place): "Why did you leave your last place?" Servant: "Once I was caught listening at the door."

LADY: "Oh! What did you hear?"

CONDUCTOR (hastily): "How old is that child?" Young Mother (indignantly): "Do I look old enough to have a child old enough to pay fare?"

FIRST GOSSIP: "Maude sat up half the night with 'Martin Chuzzlewit.'" SECOND DITTO: "Maude sits up half the night with a man. She must be engaged." THIRD DITTO: "Maude is soon to be married."

"I HAVE patented an invention that will be of incalculable benefit to the human race." "What?" "A phonographic collar-button that will make its own profanity when it rolls under the dressing-table."

MOTHER: "Come, Ella, dear, you ought to be in bed; go and give your governess a kiss and run off to bed." ELLA: "I must say good night, mother, to her; but I won't give her a kiss." MOTHER: "But why, dear?" ELLA: "Because she smacks people's faces who kiss her. She does really, mamma. You ask papa!"

NOTICES TO CORRESPONDENTS.

C. L.—Try one of the large London hospitals.

CRILL.—If his wife happens to be alive, his marriage would be illegal.

CUNNING.—Beer is the Dutch form of boor, and means a countryman or farmer.

MARTIN.—A cup of very hot milk taken at bedtime will often prevent sleeplessness.

COMFORT READER.—If your husband dies intestate you get one-third and your children two-thirds.

GRIGOR.—Bashfulness is easily remedied if a person only have a little determination and self-reliance.

EVIE.—Clap the eyelashes very carefully and only a trifle. This will probably both lengthen and thicken them.

POLLY.—Rub well with a cloth wet in kerosene oil. After using the oil wash thoroughly with hot soapy water.

A. B.—It is said that to drink sweet milk after eating onions will purify the breath so that no odour will remain.

ONE WHO WANTS TO KNOW.—If she is adequately taught at home, she need not go to school; otherwise, she must.

UNDECIDED.—There is but little choice between the hospitals you mention. Write to the superintendent of any one of them.

MABEL.—We should recommend you to give up the idea of marriage until you are a little more certain of yourself and your feelings.

H. B.—The *Flying Dutchman* is a spectral ship supposed by sailors to cruise off the Cape of Good Hope. The sight of this ship is supposed to be a very bad omen.

G. R. (Middleborough).—There certainly was an Act passed such as you describe. Whether it has been repealed or not we do not know, but it certainly is in abeyance.

INTERESTED.—It has been stated that the atmospheric concussion caused by an exploding Lyddite shell will kill at a considerable distance without material contact with the body.

PAUL.—The total loss of British troops in the Crimean War was 29,636 of all ranks, but hardly more than one in ten of these fell in battle; the others died in hospital of disease or wounds.

ANXIOUS MOTHER.—It is a mistake to send children to school too young. A child is always taking in knowledge of some sort; the brain work may well be left till the child is at least seven.

A. R.—The term "clipper" was first applied to fast trotting horses, and it was not until after it had been in vogue in sporting circles it was used to characterize swift sailing ships, yachts, &c.

VERA.—It would be wisest to leave the moles alone unless they are unsightly, in which case consult a doctor. By entreating them yourself you would probably do more harm than good.

MADGE.—It would be very foolish of you to hold the young man to his promise under such circumstances. You were evidently too young to become engaged at all, and it is quite possible that you yourself might have found this out before long, even if your lover had not anticipated you.

V. L.—Wrapped in martial cloak chaplain or an officer would read burial service over common grave, and a volley would be fired. This is when time permits, otherwise soldiers' bodies would be hurriedly buried in place where they fell.

REGULAR READER.—Write to Secretary, Civil Service Commission, Cannon-row, Westminster, S.W., requesting to be furnished with list of subjects set to candidates at examination for assistantships of Excise, and full printed details will be supplied gratis by return.

MARTHA.—Grease spots on carpets may be removed by covering with a paste made of fuller's earth and spirits of turpentine. Let the paste remain on till thoroughly dry, and then brush off. If the spots are very bad, they may need to be slightly rubbed with the paste—not too hard, or the fuller's earth will be difficult to get out.

PARTICULAR.—Take a piece of the paper and light it, and if aromatic be present you will notice an odour like that of garlic. Do not inhale the smoke. Another way of testing the paper is to pour over it a little diluted hydrochloric acid. If the greens in the pattern become blue under this treatment, it is because they contain arsenic.

M. B.—Spread it out flat on a table and then scrub it with yellow soap and soft water, applied with a nail brush. When the dirty spots are all out, rinse the mackintosh in several lots of clean, cold water, and hang it out to dry. Shake to remove as much of the water as possible, but never wring a mackintosh or put it near the fire.

HOUSEWIFE.—Sweep first, using plenty of damp tea-leaves to collect the dirt. Then wipe over with a cloth wrung out of cold water to which spirits of turpentine have been added in the proportion of one tablespoonful to a quart. Change the water as it gets dirty. Then open the windows, and do not allow anyone to walk about on the carpet till it is thoroughly dry.

TRIOUBLED HOUSEKEEPER.—Wherever your carbolic acid goes both insects and eggs will be utterly destroyed; the plan you have taken is therefore thorough, if carried far enough; fill up all cracks in walls with plaster of Paris, making a little at a time into stiff paste with water and using an old knife as trowel; wash out all bolt holes in bedstead with water containing carbolic acid.

W. M.—Unless very much stained, marble can be cleaned by simply washing the surface with warm water to which a little borax has been added. If much stained, dissolve equal parts of soap, powdered whiting, and washing soda in a little boiling water; lay over the spots while hot, let it remain on a day or two, then wash off with clean water, and polish with a soft cloth.

A. O.—The authorized translation of the Bible was produced between the years 1607-11 by forty-eight divines. The octavo edition was printed in Roman type (the same as that now employed). The previous editions of the Bible had been printed in what is now called "old English," but which in reality, was type of the German character, brought with him by Caxton when he introduced the art of printing into England.

MARCO.—Rub the spots thickly with soap, then scrape fine chalk thickly on them; put them on the grass, or falling that, out at a window in the light and air; keep them wet, and, if necessary, renew the soap and the chalk; this seldom fails to remove them; but failing that, liquid chloride of lime will do, but be careful or it will burn; keep the linen wet, and dilute the chloride of lime.

DUSTY.—The best way by which a foreigner can obtain a good knowledge of pronunciation is to listen to examples given by good speakers, and especially to conversation of educated persons. No amount of study or attention given to printed direction will give a person the correct pronunciation of foreign words and phrases. It is by imitation, namely, that accuracy of sound and accent may be obtained.

LOVE'S POEM.

If I were blind, and thou shouldst enter
E'er so softly in the room,
I should know it,
I should feel it,
Something subtle would reveal it,
And a glory round thee centre
That would lighten up the gloom;
And my heart would surely guide me,
With Love's second sight provide me,
One said the crowd to find,
If I were blind.

If I were deaf, and thou hadst spoken,
Ere thy presence I had known,
I should know it,
I should feel it,
Something subtle would reveal it,
And the seal at once be broken
By Love's liquid undertone;
Deaf to other stranger voices
And the world's discordant noises—
Whisper, where'er or thou art,
'Twill reach my heart.

SALLY.—In washing blue flannel the colour may be revived by adding vinegar to the rinsing water in the proportion of a tablespoonful to a gallon. Never put salt in the water when washing coloured fabrics to set the colour. Instead, use a piece of alum about as big as a large nut to a tub holding three or four gallons. Salt in the water makes the dannels feel sticky when dry.

CERILIA.—To be in a position to give any reliable sort of advice, it is necessary to know something about your circumstances and your qualifications. We might suggest something quite outside your capabilities or that would, at least, be entirely unbecoming to you. If you are in a position to choose what business or profession you are to follow, you must choose something for which you feel you have a distinct talent and taste.

SEVIL.—The British Government and all other first-class naval Powers have torpedoes which serve the purpose of submarine warfare in conjunction with mines fired either from the shore, or by appliances set in operation through coming into contact with an enemy's ship; but no power has a workable submarine boat, although many have been designed, and some—like a recent French one—seem so successful as to be by many considered practicable.

AMATEUR.—Cold cream is inexpensive to make and always useful to have. Melt together one ounce of white wax, two ounces of spermaceti and half a pint of almond oil. The ingredients should be placed in an earthenware vessel and put on the stove to melt gradually. Stir with a silver or a bone spoon, and when quite mixed add two ounces of pure glycerine and twelve drops of otto of roses. Continue to stir this till nearly cold, and then pour into pots for use.

RENDER.—Renting a house and paying taxes does not give a foreigner the right to vote in this country; he must first of all obtain naturalization papers by petitioning the Foreign Secretary and proving that he has resided in the United Kingdom for five years; he must state these places of residence, give the dates of his removal from the one place to another, say how many children he has, when and where they were born, and end by declaring his desire to become a subject of the British Crown.

PATRIOT.—At Bronker's Sprit, a party of 250 men of the 94th Regiment escorting some prisoners were fired upon while standing off guard by a large party of Boers, and the bulk of these shot down before they could retaliate; at Laing's Nek, an ugly pass in the mountains, the British failed to dislodge the Boers, and retired with heavy loss, their opponents retreating from following them into the open; at Ingogo River the Boers were again advantageously posted behind defences, and once more the British had to retire with heavy loss after being twelve hours under fire, but did so without drawing their enemy after them; finally at Majuba Hill, 350 British mixed troops, after an exhausting all-night walk through a roof-country and up a precipitous mountain, lay down on top of it, shaped like a sugar-bush, where they were exposed for some twelve to fifteen hours to the concentrated fire of 2,000 Boer rifles, without being able to reply with any effect, their assailants, as on other occasions, being hidden, and having them completely at their mercy; two-thirds of the British force were killed or wounded.

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What a lot of real pleasure a man FORFEITS at Christmas by neglecting his

If Father Indigestion and Mother Nightmare present their CARDS, dismiss them with

If there is anything goes off better than BONBONS this merry season, it is boxes of

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For speedily CONJURING away Bilioussness and Xmas Headache there is nothing like

The sale of other remedies is a mere BAGATELLE as compared with that of

Osculations under the MISTLETOE are scarcely more popular than Xmas interviews with

A million tongues could truthfully join in CAROLS of praise of the wonders of

For downright clever ACTING recommend me to a box of

One of the latest CONUNDRUMS is, What is the difference between a snowman and
(One is just the thing for outside fun; the other just the thing for inside work.)

What a number of real LIVING PICTURES owe their healthy looks to

After your sumptuous CHRISTMAS DINNER you should on no account forget your

What more useful article could be annexed to a CHRISTMAS TREE than a box of

As certain as SNOWBALLS hit the wrong spot, so sure is the right spot touched by

Hundreds of STORIES will be told this Yuletide of the marvels of

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Beecham's Pills.

Beecham's Pills.

Beecham's Pills?

Beecham's Pills!

Beecham's Pills.

Beecham's Pills?

Beecham's Pills.

Beecham's Pills.

After all is said and done, one of the best CHRISTMAS BOXES you can have is a box of—

BEECHAM'S PILLS.